

Closing online comments: A case study of *News24*

by

Roy McKenzie

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Department of Journalism
Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences
Supervisor: Dr. Gabriël Botma
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Roy McKenzie

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Abstract

This study examines how the decision by *News24*, South Africa's biggest news website, to close down its comments facility impacted both the media product and perceptions about the state of public discourse in South Africa. Commenting forums can be considered one of the thorniest challenges for online news publications. Ideally, comments allow readers to participate in vibrant online discussions about key issues and give instant feedback, taking the traditional letter to the editor of a newspaper one step further. This online public sphere has become an essential ingredient of a news website, increasing engagement and fostering healthy debate which serves a normative purpose by advancing democracy and social discourse. However, the reality is somewhat more complex, as the freedom of expression in commenting forums can become a free-for-all, with emboldened readers taking advantage of the anonymity and distance afforded by such forums to express themselves in abusive ways they may ordinarily not have.

A range of positivistic and critical theories are used, including uses and gratification, gate-keeping, the normative public sphere and critical political economy, to investigate the management considerations informing the decision to close the comments facility, the reactions of staff, and the implications for *News24* and perceptions about the state of public debate in South Africa. It is a case study that uses both qualitative and quantitative research methodologies in the form of interviews, an online survey, and content analysis of over 1600 comments.

This study found that *News24's* decision was based on reputational and legal concerns, and was also influenced by local and international competitors who grappled with similar issues and decided to either partially or fully close their commenting facilities. It also found the move to steer commenting to social media, particularly Facebook, could be seen as an effort to absolve *News24* of the responsibility of moderating comments, but also resulted in a loss of engagement.

Opsomming

In hierdie studie word van naderby beskou watter impak die besluit van *News24*, Suid-Afrika se grootste nuus-webwerf, om hulle afdeling vir kommentaar te sluit, gehad het op beide die media-produk en die persepsies in verband met die stand van openbare diskoers in Suid-Afrika. Forums vir kommentaar is een van die neteligste kwessies vir aanlyn nuus-publikasies.

Ideaal gesproke skep hierdie forums die geleentheid vir lesers om deel te neem aan lewendige aanlyn-besprekings oor belangrike gebeure, en om onmiddellike terugvoering te kan gee – een stap verder as die tradisionele brief aan die koerantredakteur. Hierdie aanlyn openbare sfeer het ‘n lewensbelangrike bestanddeel van die nuus-webwerf geword, wat deelname en gesonde debat aanmoedig, wat op sigself ‘n normatiewe doel dien deur demokrasie en deelname aan gesprek te bevorder. Maar die werklikheid is egter ietwat meer ingewikkeld, aangesien die spraakvryheid in kommentaar-fasiliteite kan ontaard, en lesers kan aanmoedig om misbruik te maak van van die anonimiteit en die veilige afstand wat hierdie forums bied om hulleself dan uit te druk op ‘n aggressiewe en beledigende wyse, wat hulle dalk nie onder normale omstandighede sou gedoen het nie.

Hierdie studie maak gebruik van ‘n verskeidenheid van positivistiese en kritiese teorieë, insluitende gebruik- en beloningteorie, waghouding, die normatiewe openbare sfeer en kritieke politieke ekonomie, om ondersoek in te stel na die oorweging van die bestuur wat tot die besluit gelei het om die kommentaar-fasiliteite te sluit, en die implikasies wat dit vir *News24* ingehou het, asook die effek wat dit gehad het op die stand van openbare gesprekvoering in Suid-Afrika. Dit is ‘n gevallestudie wat gebruik maak van beide kwalitatiewe-en kwantitatiewe navorsingsmetodologieë deur middel van onderhoude, ‘n aanlyn-meningspeiling, en ‘n inhoudsanalise van meer as 1600 opmerkings wat gemaak is en kommentare wat gelewer is onderaan artikels wat gehandel het oor die aankondiging van die sluiting van die kommentaar-fasiliteit op *News24*.

Die studie het bevind dat *News24* se besluit gebaseer was op oorwegings wat met beide hulle reputasie en moontlike regskwessies verband gehou het, en dat hulle besluit ook beïnvloed is deur die besluite van hulle plaaslike en internasionale mededingers om hulle kommentaar-fasiliteite deels of heeltemal te sluit. Dit het ook bevind dat die besluit om eerder die tipe kommentaar in die rigting van sosiale media, veral Facebook, te stuur, gesien kon word as ‘n poging om *News24* te onthef van die verantwoordelikheid om kommentaar te modereer, maar dat dit ook ‘n verlies aan lesersdeelname ten gevolg gehad het.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Motivation for study

The decision by South Africa's largest news website, *News24*, to shut down the commenting facility on all its articles in September 2015 (Trench, 2015:1) highlighted the debate about the way news organisations are approaching online comments and whether comments bring enough value to both the product and public debate to justify the expenses and perceived risks associated with having them. News organisations face the choice of either offering unfiltered reader comments, which can result in constructive deliberation but also abusive and problematic comments; they can moderate them, which is labour-intensive; or they can partially or completely shut comments down.

I am part of the editorial staff at *News24* and this study arose from personal observations of this debate as it unfolded in the newsroom. The rise of Web 2.0, or websites which make use of user-generated content (UGC), changed the way in which online news organisations interacted with their audiences, to the extent that readers became known as users. Bakker and Sádaba (2008:87) define a user as being active, in contrast to the traditional understanding of the audience as being essentially passive. The Internet user will seek out content according to specific needs, as opposed to a reader or audience which will receive information or entertainment in a structured way.

Web 2.0 resulted in the creation of a space for user feedback at the bottom on every story on *News24* which was automatically published when posted by a user. This resulted in about 5000 comments posted a day on *News24* (Huang, 2016:8). The high volume of comments required increased moderation and led to a number of technical and editorial challenges for *News24*. Filters and other technical mechanisms were built into the Content Management System (CMS) to prevent certain words and phrases (including racial slurs, profanities and spam) from appearing, and a system of users only being allowed to post comments when they had registered was implemented. The CMS comment moderation system was modified to allow users to report other users' comments, and *News24* editorial staff members were required to check these reported comments to either allow or disallow them. This also gave rise to a number of

challenges, such as the time required for moderation and being exposed to a large amount of vitriol and offensive comments by Internet trolls, defined as “deliberately disruptive” contributors (Page, 2012:26) who aim to cause conflict and outrage (Cook & Knight, 2013:115).

Ideally, online comments were seen as a thoughtful and enlightening space for constructive public debate, where users of all backgrounds could connect with each other and with journalists to interact and enrich the quality of journalism and public discourse (Anderson, Gardiner, Holder, Louterand, Mansfield & Ulmanu, 2016:1). This sense of community and instant feedback took the traditional letter to the editor concept one step further. However, in practice, only a small number of users posted comments, and many of those comments were not relevant to the story, or were in some way offensive (Goodman, 2013:13). *News24* in particular attracted a large number of derogatory race-related comments and suffered reputational damage as it became known for the negative tone of its comments (Trench, 2015:1).

The debate about whether to keep comments open in the belief that the Internet encourages free speech; whether to increase moderation; or whether to close comments altogether continued until *News24* management at the time took the decision in late August 2015 to close comments by default (Trench, 2015:1). This meant that automatic commenting was disabled, but could be switched on if a decision was taken to allow comments on a particular story or opinion piece. For the purposes of this study, closing comments will refer to this decision to close comments as the default position on articles. According to Trench (2015:1), the decision was informed by a realisation that the time and resources spent moderating comments could be better spent elsewhere, and also a gradual shift of comments and interaction to social media pages, where the conversations were increasingly taking place. This can also be seen as a way to absolve the organisation from the responsibility of hosting comments, while still maintaining interaction with users, just on a different platform.

This study traces the rise of online comments and these debates at *News24*, critically examining the decision to close comments and referencing other local and international websites which faced similar challenges and made similar or different decisions, as well as the reactions of staff and the perceived impact of this move. It is intended to contribute to an important current media debate and will document the various arguments and the decision making process at

News24, which can also serve an archival role in the organisation's history. The arguments can also be used as an example for other publications facing similar debates. Conducting this research will give this author a greater understanding of user engagement and how this contributes to important public discourse and interaction, as well as the management and leadership issues involved in taking such a decision, resulting in a greater appreciation of the dynamic and ever-evolving challenges associated with working in the online news media environment.

1.2 Research problem

Was *News24*'s decision to close down its comments facility the most appropriate course of action, given the circumstances and current online environment? Were the perceived reputational and legal risks for *News24* purely commercial and did this result in a loss of user engagement? What led to problematic comments, and how could these have been prevented, or better moderated, in an ideal situation? And was the decision fully considered in the light of these questions?

The study is guided by these questions and also takes place within a specific socio-political context. The nature of South African news – covering issues such as racism, transformation, politics, corruption, state capture, university fees protests and service delivery – often elicits an angry response, and users are able to express this anger and frustration by arguing in platforms such as online comments. Some of these comments could be construed as racist, sexist or offensive in some way, triggering heated responses and concerns about hate speech, which is prohibited according to the South African Constitution of 1996. But providing the ability for users to interact with other South Africans to discuss heated topics of the day is an important social function for a media, and closing comments may undermine this function.

This study examines how this debate evolved at *News24*, leading to how the decision to close comments was eventually reached. Tullis (2014:1) observed that an increasing number of online publications are turning off their commenting systems as they reassess their value due to the “arduous task of moderating the hundreds of uncivil comments that plague comment threads”. As a result, comments are losing their worth because of the effect these comments have

on the user and the site. At the same time, sites are steering the conversation towards social media, raising questions about the future of online commenting systems. Industry experts expect comment sections will be re-examined and re-imagined as publications continue to experiment with how to engage with users in the most effective way (Tullis, 2014:1). This experimentation with alternative ways of encouraging user interaction will be examined, as *News24* still offers opportunities for engagement by encouraging lengthier, considered submissions to its UGC section, *MyNews24*, which are moderated and then published, instead of simply commenting in the comments section (Trench, 2015:1).

1.3 Focus

Internationally, news websites have faced similar challenges regarding their online comments sections, trying to balance the benefits of enabling users to interact with each other with the potential pitfalls of open online expression (Ellis, 2015:1). It soon became apparent that allowing such free expression had a downside, and Internet comments were a disheartening reminder that not all freedoms are absolute: freedom of expression online needed to be balanced with the proliferation of hate speech and unsavoury content in these forums, especially in the current South African political climate. This led to significant challenges in trying to find ways to moderate comments in an attempt to achieve this balance, or solve the problem by closing down comments sections altogether.

The focus of this study will be the various arguments in the debate about whether to keep or shut down user comments at *News24*. In order to achieve this, the study will trace the emergence of online comments, which evolved from being simple notes in an online guestbook to spawning communities of users who would engage with each other on a particular topic. The rise of spam and online trolls, and the methods employed to try and deal with these challenges, as well as the debate between allowing freedom of expression or hate speech on commenting platforms, will also be considered.

1.4 Literature study

1.4.1 Online comments

The World Editors Forum and the Open Society Foundations published their first report on comment moderation in 2013, finding that online comments are an integral part of a flourishing news publication and users embrace the opportunity to engage in dialogue online as opposed to the one-way direction in traditional broadcasting (Goodman, 2013:5). They released a second report in 2016, finding that newsroom resources have since become increasingly strained while the tone of comments had worsened and organisations are generally following their users onto social media platforms, but despite this 82% of the 78 organisations surveyed in 46 countries still invite user comments in some form (Huang, 2016:4).

Cook and Knight (2013:114) state that the comments section on a news website is an extension of the traditional letters to the editor page in a newspaper, where readers could share their views. For this reason, comments sections could be a key part of the appeal of one online publication over another for users, many of whom return repeatedly to see what responses their comment has received, thereby fostering increased user interaction. Although many media organisations had initially considered comments to be a burden, they started to see them as a valuable resource because of this sense of community which resulted in greater reader engagement (Goodman, 2013:5) and as a result, comments formed a significant part of the online strategy and business models for many organisations (Cook & Knight, 2013:115). At the same time, new challenges emerged, such as how to strike the right balance between moderating comments and maintaining freedom of speech. While the Internet has transformed free speech online, there are few ground rules and the benefits can be undermined when it is taken too far by those who post offensive and provocative comments (Goodman, 2013:1).

Frost (2011:323) argued that while the Internet and increased interactivity has changed journalism for the better in many ways, it is also capable of causing damage, with unmoderated comments sections offering opportunities to attack and condemn others without any sanction. Tsukayama (2013:1) saw comments as one of the biggest problems on the Internet, arguing that even though they can add valuable depth to online content, negative comments raise worrying

questions about the mindsets of members of the society we share. This is echoed by Anderson et al (2016:1) who state that at their worst, comments can be “crude, bigoted or just vile”.

1.4.2 Moderating comments

Moderation can be described as the process whereby comments considered unsuitable according to an organisation’s rules and guidelines are removed in order to ensure a high quality of discussion and debate (Goodman, 2013:8). Cook and Knight (2013:115) define moderation simply as checking and managing comments which have been posted on a site.

Sunyer (2014:1) observed that comments sections can be dysfunctional places where it is difficult to avoid the negativity people would ordinarily avoid. For this reason, publishers started looking into the best ways to moderate such comments. Many employed techniques such as requiring users to log in with a real identity such as an e-mail address or a social media profile, most commonly Facebook, before commenting. Such efforts often only partially controlled the burgeoning problem because of the ease of creating anonymous e-mail addresses and social media profiles, so stricter measures such as having each comment approved before publication (pre-moderation) were employed, as well as users flagging problematic comments. All of these were difficult to control and labour intensive, with teams of moderators being employed at some organisations to monitor comments. When this did not work, many websites started closing down their comments sections altogether.

In response to this problem, new approaches and tools are being developed: the Mozilla Foundation, Knight Foundation, the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* announced they were teaming up to form The Coral Project, which builds open-source tools to assist publishers and user engagement. Its first product is a search tool aimed at assisting news organisations moderate comments by assessing a user’s previous comments and contribution history (Lichterman, 2016:1). And the *New York Times* announced it was partnering with Google Jigsaw to create a moderation system which will review comments based on past moderation systems using advanced machine learning technology (Etim, 2016:1).

1.4.3 Closing comments

One of the first mainstream publications to take the step of closing comments was the US magazine *Popular Science* in 2013 (LaBarre, 2013:1). This was followed by a steady stream of mostly US publications including *Reuters*, *CNN*, *Recode*, *The Week*, *Mic*, *The Verge*, *USA Today*, *Bloomberg Business*, *The Daily Beast*, *Motherboard*, *The Chicago-Sun Times*, and *The Toronto Star* and others around the world. Locally, *TimesLIVE* closed comments on most of its publications, and was followed by *News24*, *IOL* and the *Daily Maverick* (Huang, 2016:4). The decision by *IOL* came just 10 months after the publication of a report by its owner, Independent Media, which found that it is desirable to host comments in the interest of freedom of expression, as long as the constitutional rights of users are not infringed. It also found it is preferable to pre-moderate comments, which required extra staff, and that clear guidelines and definitions should be formulated (Brown, Louw, McKaiser, Milo, Mobara & Robinson, 2015:1)

IOL said closing comments was a “difficult but necessary decision” but that offering the facility for comments was a courtesy to users, not a right. Freedom of expression was not meant to override the personal freedom and human rights of others, and that abuse in the comments section had become “untenable” (Ephraim, 2015:1) despite the report recommendations. *IOL* however acknowledged the “critical role that public debate plays in bolstering the legitimacy of our social and political discourse” and called for contributions to be emailed to the organisation (Ephraim, 2015:1). The *Daily Maverick* meanwhile, argued that while it had hoped that its comments section would “play a central role in fostering healthy, robust, sharp-edged debate – a town hall in which all were welcome” (*Daily Maverick*, 2016:1) - the reality was that a small but significant of users trolled the site and the comments were tarnishing its brand and “we’d rather spend our precious resources for journalism than for policing the hatred” (*Daily Maverick*, 2016:1). Both cited similar reputational, legal and commercial concerns as *News24*, while also stressing that constructive debate remained important, leaving an option for users to send in their opinions.

Fiegerman (2014:1) stated that while the idea of closing comments sections was initially controversial, it has gained acceptance, particularly as much discussion now takes place on social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter instead. Media organisations also increasingly came to

realise that offering a platform for comments was not part of their core service, and it was not worth their time and resources to try and manage it, suggesting that commercial priorities have drowned out arguments that the media can serve both a commercial and public obligation.

“Online comments are on the way out,” stated Gross (2014:1), citing how many websites were closing comments and steering users to social media. *CNN* disabled comments on most articles, but activates them on select stories which it believes can elicit constructive debate, and in which journalists and editors can actively participate. Staff also regularly host discussions on the organisation’s social media accounts (Gross, 2014:3). *Reuters* stated that the way users interact with news has changed, and much of the debates and discussions around news articles had moved to social media, where conversations are self-policed by participants to weed out offensive contributions (Colarusso, 2014:1).

US publication *The Daily Dot* announced in July 2015 that it was putting comments on “indefinite hiatus”, arguing that while community and interaction were core to its business, the engagement was increasingly uncivil (Powell & White, 2015:3). Technology website *The Verge* also decided to shut comments temporarily in July 2015, stating it had got into a bad feedback loop:

The tone of our comments (and some of our commenters) is getting a little too aggressive and negative... It’s hard for us to do our best work in that environment, and it’s even harder for our staff to hang out with our audience and build the relationships that led to us having a great community in the first place. (Patel, 2015:1)

The Verge also stated it would keep its forums open and switch on comments on a post-by-post basis in the interim, but that “comments will be back”.

According to Holmes (2014:2) while the real-time feedback and user engagement offered by online comments were initially considered revolutionary, it now makes more sense to steer those discussions to external sites where media organisations do not have to moderate the discussions, and where most users are already interacting with other users, despite concerns

about this loss of control. Holmes (2014:2) argued there is no easy answer to the question of whether comments are dead or will continue, but this largely depends on whether a website can devote significant resources to moderating comments and engaging with users. If not, then shifting those discussions to social media makes sense.

Goldberg (2015:1) observed that the debate over whether to keep or close comments cuts to the core of online journalism – audience participation and interaction. Users no longer consume news in the traditional top-down format, but engage with it on their own terms. But closing comments appears to counter this engagement strategy, chiefly because it pushes those who want to engage to another platform. Some organisations are happy if it means freeing up resources for core functions like producing unique content, Goldberg (2015:2) argued. Hagmann (2015:3) observed that outsourcing comments may not be a good thing, as organisations cannot set the standards for commenting, and also hand over crucial user engagement to a third party, which can control how the comments appear and function. Another concern is that Facebook and other social media companies are primarily concerned with collecting user data for advertising and marketing purposes, and by handing over comments to them, organisations are supporting their commercial goals, Hagmann argued.

Meanwhile, other publications have tried a different approach: *Quartz* offered the option of leaving annotations in article margins, while *Vox* built technology to identify problem commentators through word identification. The fact remains that the most important focus for online media organisations is how engaged and responsive they are with their users, and whether they have a relationship with them, argues Fiegerman (2014:2).

1.4.4 Theoretical points of departure

Normative theory sees the media as serving a social purpose by encouraging debate and interaction, thereby advancing democracy, according to Fourie (2007:178). However, the antithesis can occur in certain comments sections, where intolerance and anti-democratic sentiments can be fanned. This will be examined in relation to whether the nature of the interaction in online comments can be considered to be representative of current popular thought,

where honest opinions are expressed, or whether incivility in online comments can counteract the normative role of online interaction.

Habermas (1989:236) saw the ideal public sphere as an arena where open debate between citizens and government can occur, and where public opinion can be formed, thereby playing an important democratic function. However, the rise of the mass media and its associated commercial and political interests which sought to influence public opinion undermined this notion of the ideal public sphere (Athique, 2013:195). Especially in the early stages of the development of the Internet, online comment forums were largely free from such commercial or political interference, and could thus be seen as an ideal public sphere where public opinions were formed. But the processes of commercialisation brought about increased control and moderation of comments, constraining unfiltered debate, while closing comments completely hindered this opportunity for debate, undermining the ideal public sphere. Media organisations, however, claim this moderation is an attempt to harness potential hate speech and undemocratic sentiments. Mouffe (1999:757), meanwhile, argues that democratic politics should not “eliminate passions” or conflict in order to promote rational debate as Habermas envisioned, but should rather mobilise this energy in pursuit of democratic discourse. Agonistic confrontation and conflict are thus seen as an important component of democracy.

The reasons for undermining the public sphere can be analysed using political economic theory. McQuail (2010:96) states this is a critical approach which centres on the relationship between media industries, which are capitalist entities with links to the political and economic system, and the ideological content of what the media produces. Commercial constraints affect media production, with concentration, risk avoidance, fewer independent voices and sources, and reduced investment in unprofitable areas such as investigative reporting. Political economy theory can be applied to the Internet, especially the way in which users are seen as a commodity which can be sold to advertisers.

1.5 Gaps in field of research

As the online media environment is constantly evolving, particularly relating to online comments and user interaction, academic scholarship on the challenges associated with

comments and debates about whether to close comments are emerging relatively recently (Reagle, 2015), with most of it in reports (Goodman, 2013:1; Huang, 2016:1) or in the media itself (Ellis, 2015:1; Anderson et al, 2016:1), as publications share the decisions they have made about their comments policies.

Gaps in the field include assessing the extent of hate speech in online comments, and legal liability for these, which could inform decisions on whether to close comments, and whether commercial considerations have outweighed normative functions in such decisions. Huang (2016:1) profiles a number of international publications which have closed comments, and while *News24* is included, this report fails to examine the broader context, particularly legal and reputational concerns as well as the perceptions of staff and users to the move, and the implications for the product and for the state of discourse in the country. Reagle (2015:1) and Bartlett (2014:23) examine troll behaviour in online comments, but this does not explain the negative effects of such antisocial behaviour in South Africa, given its historical sensitivity to racial abuse. Lipschultz (2015:39) discusses online identity formation, but this could also be applied to a South African context, especially in relation to hierarchies relating to language skills and technological access impacting on the nature of comments that are posted.

These will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 2.

1.6 Problem statement

This study examines the decision by *News24* to close comments a year after it was implemented, questioning whether the move has had a perceived positive or negative impact on the organisation. It analyses whether the decision was made for commercial reasons, in order to avoid reputational and legal risk, and whether other ways of moderating comments were considered. The question of whether closing comments has undermined the notion of an ideal public sphere, where users can participate in free and open debate, was also examined from the perspective of management and staff, along with the best ways to manage comments in future, and what will need to be in place to make a decision to reinstate a comments section. Finally, it questions whether online comments are beneficial for a news organisation, and for society.

1.7 Research questions

The general research question is: How did the decision by *News24* to close down its comments facility impact the organisation?

The specific research questions are:

1. Did staff members and users of *News24* agree with the decision to close comments?
2. What were the key reasons for closing comments at *News24*?
3. How was *News24* affected by the decision to close the comments?
4. How did the closing of comments affect perceptions of online news media, and specifically *News24*, as an ideal public sphere?
5. Is outsourcing comments to social media, especially Facebook, regarded as the best approach for *News24*?
6. What is the ideal situation for hosting online comments, according to *News24* staff and management?

1.8 Methodology and approach

1.8.1 The qualitative/quantitative debate

This study will focus on the debates about the merits of online comments and whether to shut them down and will use both qualitative and quantitative research methodology. According to Du Plooy (2009:30), the qualitative research approach focuses on the interpretation and construction of different types of interaction and experiences. It is mostly exploratory, and can include field research, ethnography and critical research. Qualitative research methods will be used to gain a better understanding of the reasoning behind the decision to close comments and why they were problematic, which will form a key component of the case study of the *News24* debate. The quantitative research approach uses numerical measurement, which can be interpreted in an unbiased, mathematical way. It is also known as positivist or empirical research, due to its scientific underpinnings (Du Plooy, 1991:67).

Case studies are mostly qualitative in nature and focus on presenting an in-depth description of a specific case or a small number of cases, predominantly through asking exploratory and descriptive questions, according to Mouton (2001:149). Dominick and Wimmer (2006:136) state that a case study is different to an experiment in that it studies something in its real-life context as opposed to separating it from that, and can reveal more detailed information than a survey can. There can be single and multiple cases, such as a comparative study. Case studies also provide a large amount of information and detail about a particular research topic, which can also result in ideas for further studies in that area. They can also make use of a wide range of evidence, from interviews and surveys to documents and data.

The benefits of an empirical case study include obtaining considerable insight into the topic and establishing a significant rapport with research subjects. The fact that I am employed at *News24* will assist in this case. However, apart from this ethical consideration, there is also the limitation that results may not be generalised and that potential bias on the part of the researcher (or subjects, during interviews with the researcher) may emerge during the interview and survey phase.

Content analysis will be used to analyse comments selected from a column on *News24* announcing the decision, plus comments on other online articles relating to the decision, which will be used as examples of the public reaction to the move while also demonstrating some of the arguments on the merits or disadvantages of comments. Du Plooy (2009:58) defines content analysis as the quantitative or qualitative analysis of the content of a mediated message. The qualitative content analysis will aim to answer the research questions of whether the decision by *News24* to close comments was the right one according to its users, and what the general sentiment of the users was to the move, by coding and measuring the responses. It will also aim to demonstrate some of the concerns and observations from users to the move, and how this fits in with the ideas of free speech and democracy, versus hate speech and the damage this can cause. Comments that demonstrate logical, informed, critical analysis of the issue at hand, and contribute to the debate on the topic, will be highlighted, as will comments which are not relevant to the topic, and are inflammatory or offensive, in order to show the varying degrees of response to the decision. According to Berger (2011:205), content analysis allows researchers to

measure human behaviour by studying the content of what this behaviour produces – in this study, the range of responses found in online comments.

1.8.2 Sampling

One of the biggest challenges will be what Mouton (2011:195) describes as the “selection of cases”, or sampling, which applies to both quantitative and qualitative research. Dominick and Wimmer (2006:88) define a sample as a subset of a group of variables that is representative of the broader population. Probability samples, which are selected following mathematical guidelines, give all variables an equal chance of being selected, while non-probability sampling does not follow such guidelines. This can be used in cases where the research focuses on analysing relationships between variables, and does not need to generalise across the entire population. In this case study, it will be difficult to consider all comments made on every story published on *News24*, so over 1 000 comments posted on one particular opinion piece, and over 500 comments on other news articles on the topic in the same time period of a week will be selected for quantitative analysis on the basis that they represent public opinion on the decision to close comments. However, there is a danger of sampling error as these are not representative of the wider population. In this case, only a small percentage of users – around 1% in *News24*’s case (Huang, 2016:11) actually post comments, even though a much larger percentage of users read them. But this 1% is representative of those who comment. This will be dealt with more fully in the next chapter.

At the same time, purposive non-probability sampling was used when selecting which members of the *News24* management team to select, according to the extent of their involvement in the decision to close comments and the future direction of comments, while members of the *News24* editorial team were selected to take part in the survey according to their past or current involvement in comment moderation.

There are also concerns of bias on the part of the researcher when selecting the comments to be analysed or the questions to be asked in the interviews and survey. Dominick and Wimmer (2006:91) state that the sampling procedure must be free of bias and this should be prevented through the sampling design. In this research, the sampling design will be limited to the process

of selecting and analysing the comments on a limited number of articles and according to simple criteria, outlined in Chapter 4.

In order to answer the research questions, a combination of interviews and an online survey will be used. Priest (1996:26) describes a depth interview as an ethnographic technique which is an “open-ended conversational exploration of an individual’s worldview or some aspect of it”. It is not as structured as a survey questionnaire, which allows the researcher to interact more with the interviewee and ask follow-up questions in order to gain more information. Key members of *News24*’s management team – the editor, community manager, social media editor and product manager – will be interviewed based on research questions.

Meanwhile, the *News24* editorial team, consisting of approximately 20 people who were involved in the moderation of comments, will be asked to complete an online survey, using Survey Monkey. According to Anderson (2012:218), a survey is the most commonly used form of metric protocol, and it is used to examine what properties and attributes exist in the chosen field of research – in this case, the questions will focus on the positives and negatives of online comments; how comments were moderated and if that was considered to be successful; whether the respondents agree or disagree with the decision to close comments; whether shifting conversations to social media is necessarily a good thing; and the ideal future of online interaction. As Anderson (2012:218) points out, the questions and the format of the survey need to assist in the easy handling of data, and also be appealing and accessible to respondents in order to avoid a poor return rate.

Ethical considerations will arise as this researcher is employed by *News24*, and *News24* staff and management will be interviewed as part of the research. These participants will be selected, and asked to volunteer. There will be no potential disadvantage to participants, and no remuneration or incentives will be offered in order to take part. The Stellenbosch University Research Ethics Committee gave its approval to the research proposal on condition that certain guidelines were followed. This included conducting the research according to the committee’s approved research protocol. Permission has been obtained from *News24* management for the research project.

1.9 Steps of research

1. Detailed literature review of the field of study, namely online comments.
2. Theoretical framework and establish research methodology.
3. Collect online comments on selected articles relating to *News24*'s decision to close comments; use content analysis to classify them.
4. Compose questions for in-depth interview with *News24* management in order to answer research questions on closing comments, public debate and the future of comments.
5. Compile online survey for *News24* editorial staff to answer research questions on the decision to close comments, and the ideal situation for comments.
6. Collect data from completed interviews, survey and content analysis, and analyse findings in terms of how they answered the research questions and the research problem.
7. Write up findings.

1.10 Chapter outline

Chapter 1: Introduction

This chapter introduced the author's motivation for this study, and detailed the research problem and focus, with a short review of the literature on the topic and where there are possible gaps in scholarship on this field. The research questions, methodology and structure of the research are introduced.

Chapter 2: Literature review

In this chapter, a more detailed analysis of the current literature on the topic of comments and comments moderation on news websites will be introduced.

Chapter 3: Theoretical framework

A detailed explanation of the theoretical framework, namely the normative approach looking at the public sphere and critical political economy paradigms, will be given.

Chapter 4: Methodology

A comprehensive explanation of the research methodology, a combination of qualitative and quantitative, will be provided, detailing how it relates to the research questions and the focus of the study.

Chapter 5: Findings, discussion

This chapter will contain a review of the research questions and their implementation, and give a detailed analysis of the findings of the content analysis employed in this study, as well as the interviews, survey results and an in-depth discussion on the findings.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

This chapter will return to the goals set out in the introduction and review all of the findings of the research, summarising each chapter, in order to answer the research question and make a conclusion on whether *News24* had benefited or had suffered as a result of its decision to close comments.

1.11 Summary

This introduction chapter has set out the motivation for this study and research problem, and detailed the approach and design of the research. The chapter sets out the background and current literature on the topic of how South Africa's major news websites, particularly *News24*, approach the vexing issue of online comments and how attempted to moderate these, striking a balance between allowing freedom of expression and preventing hate speech, before taking the decision to close comments. The chapter has shown how a number of international news websites have also taken that decision, and has highlighted the main reasons for closing online comments. The following chapters will take this discussion further, focusing particularly on the impact on *News24* and on the state of public discourse in South Africa as a result of the decision.

Chapter 2: Literature review

2.1 Overview

According to Anderson (2012:58), a literature review establishes the starting point of the research and the theoretical principles which will inform the research questions and general hypotheses. It is the connection to the field of research and has to be comprehensive in order to demonstrate that the researcher has grasped the content under discussion. However, a thorough review of all literature in the field can have the danger of “colonizing my experience” (Anderson, 2012:59) or impacting on the understanding of the experience, and some researchers prefer to place it towards the end of a research paper. Given that this researcher works in the field under consideration, such “colonization” is unavoidable, and this chapter is placed at the start of the research. Priest (1996:74) states that a literature review assists the researcher in clarifying conceptual issues and discovering the most suitable theories and methods to be used, and is thus important to complete early in the research process in order to avoid wasting time on extraneous data.

This chapter shall therefore examine the field of research - the online news environment and online comments, as well as the challenges that arose from these comments, such as how publishers had to balance free speech versus hate speech in their attempt to promote healthy public discourse. Issues borrowed from the field of cyber psychology, such as online identity and anonymity, as well as the concept of deindividuation, will also be considered given their possible explanation for the behaviour of some online commenters who post offensive comments, resulting in the need for moderation, questions about whether the uncivil comments were affecting *News24*’s reputation, and the eventual decision to close comments. It will be followed by chapters outlining the theoretical framework underpinning the research, and the research methodologies which will be used in this study.

2.2 The online news environment

The rise of the Internet and online news sites resulted in a “two-way street” of information between journalists and their audience, resulting in the conventions of journalism being adapted to include this interaction (Allan, 2006:15). Online news thus became a

collaborative endeavour, with citizen journalists and user interaction challenging the status quo, and with boundaries between a local community and a virtual community becoming blurred. Users were seen as playing a central role in shaping the form and content of this interactive environment (Bakker & Sádaba, 2008:88), as the Internet changed the way in which people work, do research and communicate with each other. This was also considered a threat to established journalistic norms and values, meaning that journalists and media organisations have at times been resistant to embrace citizen journalism or user-generated content, despite the potential for valuable input and feedback, as well as its potential democratic public sphere role (Wahl-Jorgensen et al, 2011:115).

In this uncharted territory, there were few ground rules. King (2010:196) describes the rise of online news and challenges such as free speech on the Internet as being “like the Wild West”, with few laws and guidelines, and difficulty in enforcing these laws. Anderson, Brossard, Ladwig, Scheufele & Xenos (2014:374) argue that while the Internet has the potential to enrich public deliberation by a wide range of audiences in different locations, through facilities such as comments sections, they also observe that such discussions are not always rational and “online incivility” can counteract this democratic goal.

2.3 Comments

Reagle (2015:2) defines online comments as a genre of communication, in that they are social (seen by others and reactive); they are short and easy to post; and they are asynchronous, meaning they can be posted within seconds, or even days. They can also inform (through reviews); improve (through user feedback); manipulate (through fake posts); alienate (through hate speech); shape (via social comparison); and perplex web users, according to Reagle (2015:3), who further argues that their pervasiveness as well as their current ubiquity, negative reputation, and impact on our social environment make them worthy of consideration:

Comment is a characteristic of contemporary life: it can inform, improve, and shape people for the better, and it can alienate, manipulate, and shape people for the worse. The negatives can

seem more potent than the positives, but there are many benefits to today's comment. (Reagle, 2015:184)

Comments can be likened to gossip which is a form of basic social interaction comprising language and a social network and is considered an important human character trait. Such interaction has been documented by evolutionary psychologist Robin Dunbar, who noted that when a community reaches more than 150, members complain that it is not the same as it used to be as people no longer know each other personally, and it is easier for it to descend into rudeness and chaos. This is significant in understanding why comments can fail or become unmanageable on the web, according to Reagle (2015:4). US lawyer Mike Godwin observed that the longer an online discussion grows, the more likely it will degenerate. This 'Godwin's Law' is especially observed in online comments (Bartlett, 2014:42).

Binns (2012:547) likens comments sections to a successful pub, which features interesting personalities and lively debate. But Reagle (2015:172) points out that some prefer not to see comments as an "online reflecting glass of humanity" and thus disable or restrict them on their sites, enabling users to flee "filtered sludge" (Reagle, 2015:3).

Insight and wisdom might not always be found at the bottom half of the Web, but it does have a sample of what some people are thinking, right or wrong, offensive or trite. (Reagle, 2015:172).

2.4 Interaction

One of the reasons for the gradual demise of newspapers is their inability to fully engage with and interact with readers and their specific needs, including immediate and relevant news, argue Imfeld and Scott (2005:205). The traditional top-down relationship between a newspaper and its readers has changed since the advent of the Internet, and newspapers have had to adapt, and establish their own websites. Imfeld and Scott (2005:206) state that many of these newspaper websites attract users from the newspaper's traditional geographical base, meaning readers have shifted from the print to the online version. However, many print or broadcast journalists have not adapted their behaviour and do not necessarily engage with users online and

interact in online comments. But where they do, there is often a “more robust and respectful online community”, according to Cook and Knight (2013:118).

An online community forms when users create a bond or shared identity with others they interact with online, even though they have nothing else in common, states King (2010:268). Russell (2011:138) uses the term “imagined communities” - coined by historian and political scientist Benedict Anderson in his work on the origins of nationalism - to describe user interaction, arguing that audiences see themselves as part of a group which exists beyond their everyday reality. According to Lipschultz (2015:39), online communities materialise when people spent time with those with similar characteristics and develop realistic relationships with them, although in social media the emphasis is more sharing than disclosing, while in individual relationships there is both. There are four main differences between Internet interaction and real-life interaction according to Cecala and LeDuff (2012:91): You can be anonymous online; you can be physically anywhere; your appearance doesn’t matter; and time is also not important on the Internet. But at the heart of an online community is the need to connect with others and broaden social networks, observes Lipschultz (2015:34).

Web 2.0 has led to a new form of interactive culture, where users are active at the same time as producers, participating in the construction of online content and consuming content created by others at the same time, state Beer & Gane (2010:98). As Foust (2009:171) observes, the central point is that the user “is *involved* in the information and thus is not only more interested but more *informed*” (original emphasis). As a result, audience participation or interaction both fosters greater interest from users and bolsters an organisation’s reputation if it is perceived to listen to its audience (Foust, 2009:12).

The advent of Web 2.0 has also raised questions about how new technologies can shape human interaction and access to information, as well as what happens to this information and how it can be used, as (Beer & Gane, 2010:98) state:

The concept of interactivity might prove useful for examining the dominant rhetoric and understandings of new online cultures of

user-generated content, which tend to tell us of the power of new media to liberate and democratize online spaces.

Jenkins (2012:204) makes a distinction between interactivity and participation, arguing that interactivity refers to how new technologies are more responsive to consumer feedback. For example, TV viewers could previously only interact by changing the channel, but the advent of personal video recorders (PVR) has given viewers more control. But this interaction is still controlled by technological design and constraints, so it is limited. Participation, however, can be seen to be shaped by cultural and social protocols, and is more open-ended and controlled by the media consumers. The web has become a good example of this open-ended consumer participation, as Jenkins (2012:205) observes:

Allowing consumers to interact with media under controlled circumstances is one thing; allowing them to participate in the production and distribution of cultural goods – on their own terms – is something else altogether.

Driscoll, Garrison and Salwen (2015:133) state that audience interactivity can be seen as an exchange of both information and action which empowers the audience and is also beneficial to the website, so much so that it has become mandatory in the design and layout of a website. Interaction “has been viewed to delight visitors, to motivate them to initiate two-way and group-communication, and to become more involved with the site and its goods and services”. (Driscoll et al. 2005:133). According to Page (2012:54), comments attract a community of users to a blog and the comments in turn shape blog posts. This led to the observation that the interaction between the blogger (but which can also apply to a journalist) and audience influences the overall experience. Comments allow users to “display their engagement with others and their position within a wider social group”, stated Page (2012:203). The quantity of comments could also be seen as a measure of the host’s active involvement with the audience, with better comments leading to assumed greater interaction.

2.5 Identity

There has also been social science research into interaction and identity, and how identity is discursively formed. Researchers initially saw online identity as a “mask” that was separate from real life, while later researchers have argued that identities offline and online can overlap but need not be separate. As social media has become more common, some critics argue that the distinction is no longer relevant, according to Page (2012:17).

A discursive view is ideally positioned to interpret the identity work that occurs in online contexts. Online interaction primarily takes place by means of discourse: text that is created by its participants, but that is not usually received in face-to-face contexts. The apparently disembodied nature of CMC [Computer-mediated communication] and its potential for identity play through the sense of anonymity, pseudonyms, or inauthentic personae would seem the environment par excellence for the enactment of identities through discourse. (Page, 2012:17)

A central focus of interactivity and CMC is identity formation and presentation, and how online communities are formed, according to Lipschultz (2015:28). People with an online presence choose how to present themselves and what they want to share about themselves online, and this happens through interaction with other people. Online identity can be influenced by factors such as gender, anonymity, language, narcissism. As Lipschultz (2015:31) observes, identity can be altered on the Internet. For instance, it is easier to be anonymous on Twitter than it is on Facebook, which requires a more personal profile, even though this can be altered.

There is also a perception that CMC breaks down barriers and hierarchies, allowing for more interaction and social experimentation, but it can create such barriers and hierarchies, observes Lipschultz (2015:39). Not only is there the technological barrier of hardware and Internet speed and access, but users can appear online using a false or constructed identity which can affect interaction. Seargeant and Tagg (2014:7) argue that the notion of authenticity is important when dealing with the question of identity and multiple identities. The image

presented should ideally relate to the person behind it, as this serves as an anchor for communication. However, this is not always the case as the nature of the discourse can be seen as more important than the identity behind it.

The traditional understanding of identity as fixed or biologically determined has evolved into seeing it as something that is more dynamic and interactional due to the possibility for online anonymity according to Vásquez (2014:66). Seargeant and Tagg (2014:5) state that identity is now seen to be “a set of resources which people draw upon in presenting and expressing themselves via interaction with others”. Identity can therefore be repeatedly constructed and adapted depending on the context, and conditions in which this is possible. It is thus possible to talk of people having different identities which can change according to the context. This can be seen in online comments when users match their comments to those of the story they’re commenting on or the tone of the other comments.

Seargeant and Tagg (2014:9) state that identities are also formed by aligning with those who have similar values and opinions. This is especially true in social media or in online interaction. While there are more specialised websites and blogs for more specific communities, there are also more loosely defined and casual communities, such as those who follow particular hashtags or those who comment in online comment threads. Seargeant and Tagg (2014:12) define these as “ambient affiliation”, a transient virtual space which is less of a community but still allows users to find topics and share their thoughts with other like-minded individuals.

2.6 Anonymity

Cecala and LeDuff (2012:88) argue that while the Internet allows people to communicate across boundaries such as geography or race or gender, the anonymity it afforded people enabled them to lie about who they are and share their views and opinions without any of the accountability they would normally exhibit in a face-to-face conversation. This is echoed by Cook and Knight (2013:116) who state:

It is a sad fact that anonymity brings out the worst in people, and maintaining a balance between an open discussion and a free-for-all is a constant battle for site managers.

Reader (2012:497) considers anonymity as harmful in some circumstances, such as controversial stories; useful in contexts (such as medical research), and also a matter of personal choice. It can “curb social inhibitions” which can result in hateful content, but can also broaden and encourage participation in comments forums. Konnikova (2013:2) also points out that allowing anonymous comments encourages participation, as users can take greater risks by being more honest, which can make for more interesting reading and online discussions. However, it is also ironic, Reader (2012:498) argues, that journalists who use anonymous sources for their stories oppose anonymous comments in forums. There are also reputational concerns for media organisations. Tarsi and Wallsten (2014:1) found that moves against anonymous comments were fuelled by a belief that anonymous comments not only result in uncivil comments, but can also influence users to the extent of changing their perception of a news story and towards the media, particularly in a negative light.

Banning anonymous comments may curb offensive and hateful comments, but it will not necessarily curb the underlying convictions of those who are inclined to express such views, Reader (2012:507) observes. This is echoed by Villines (2016:1) who stated that requiring users to post comments under their real name will not necessarily prevent abusive online behaviour, and can sometimes increase trolling if an individual has a particular viewpoint they want to get across, or wants to gain followers, according to Villines (2016:1). Reagle (2015:95) states such users can become even more extreme as they identify with similar people, or get more polarised as they absorb trolling and unpleasant comments, according to Reagle (2015:95).

Meanwhile, Russian authorities are pushing for users to be required to register on a state identification and authentication system in order to be able to post comments on websites. While this would relieve websites of the responsibility for policing comments, but has also raised concerns about anonymity and that users who post critical comments could be identified and penalised (Lokot, 2016:1)

Nielsen (2013:471) surveyed 583 US journalists to determine whether anonymous online comments affected news content or challenged the journalistic principles of transparency and the practice of gatekeeping. The study found that the majority of journalists dislike anonymous comments and are sceptical of them. It also found that few journalists read comments below their

stories as they do not feel they have much to offer apart from largely negative and offensive reactions. A few did read these comments and engaged with users in order to get news tips and different perspectives, but these were in the minority. Nonetheless, journalists strongly supported the ability for users to post comments as it allowed these users a chance to interact with the content of the story and with each other (Nielsen, 2013:482).

A Pew study about online anonymity found that 25% of people have posted anonymous comments, according to Beaujon (2013:1). The study also found that people chose different ways of masking themselves from different people while online, in other words, they would employ strategies to remain anonymous if posting something controversial or something that their friends or family could see. However, while users may think they're anonymous, they can often be traced by IP addresses.

Publications found they had to balance allowing anonymous comments, and the benefits such as increased page views and thus more revenue, as well as greater interaction; with controlling offensive content by requiring users to register before commenting, and use their real identities. "Anonymity meant less credibility, civility and sincerity – not good for the brand – but requiring real identities would most certainly curtail the commenting," writes Robinson (2010:135). According to Bartlett (2014:43), the easiest way to deal with online incivility is to remove anonymity in order to make trolls more accountable, but this also has its drawbacks:

Anonymity is not a modern invention designed to protect trolls. It also allows people to be honest and open and invisible when there are good reasons to. We dispense with that at our peril. (Bartlett, 2014:43)

2.7 Deindividuation

According to Suler (2016:96), Internet users often say and do things while online that they would never ordinarily say or do in the real world, largely because they feel uninhibited and can express previously suppressed thoughts. This is known in cyber psychology as deindividuation or the online disinhibition effect. Cecala and LeDuff (2012:91) define deindividuation as the way in which Internet users will abandon their normal standards and feel

safe posting extreme comments in an environment where others are doing the same thing, essentially because they do not feel they have to take as much responsibility for it. Reagle (2015:94) describes deindividuation as “a loss of sense of self and social norms”, adding that if people are forced to identify themselves, they are more likely to display a sense of self and of accountability in their interactions. However, this also means that people can share their prejudices and anger easily, which results in “the dark underworld of the Internet... places they would never explore in the real world” (Suler, 2004:321). There are a number of factors which enable people to let their psychological barriers down online, chief among these being anonymity.

When people have the opportunity to separate their actions online from their in-person lifestyle and identity, they feel less vulnerable about self-disclosing and acting out. Whatever they say can't be directly linked to the rest of their lives. (Suler, 2004:322).

One of the reasons Internet users exhibit a greater degree of status equalisation and disinhibition online than in real life is because there are no visual and social cues that would normally regulate how people would interact with each other, states Reagle (2015:94). This can be described as “Internet balls”, or “Internet fuckwad theory”, where “a normal person + anonymity + an audience = total fuckwad”, according to Reagle (2015:95). Bartlett (2014:43) observes that between 65 and 93% of human communication is non-verbal, meaning people have evolved to primarily pick up cues such as posture, tone and facial expression to assist in understanding and empathising with others when they are communicating. This lack of visual and auditory cues removes this and also creates misunderstandings and misconceptions, which results in the meanings of words being left to the “imagination of our transference tendencies” states Suler (2016:149), who explains that transference reactions influence a person's interpretation of most interactions, especially text communication.

The online disinhibition effect contributes to interpersonal battles, in part because it tends to encourage transference and projection. When people become disinhibited through anonymity, invisibility,

and equalized status, the thoughts and feelings that surface often are unleashed hostile ones that generate conflict. (Suler, 2016:150)

In online environments, users also tend to regress and confuse the person with the computer, with some seeing the machine as human and others regarding those they are talking to online as something less than human, Suler (2016:96) points out.

Meanwhile, there is also a competing theory to deindividuation: depersonalisation. This can be described as “a shift from a sense of self toward a group and its norms”, states Reagle (2015:97), who explains that under deindividuation, people lose sense of themselves and their inhibitions, while under depersonalisation, “morality shifts toward a different set of norms” (Reagle, 2015:97) and people take on the tone and sentiments of a group.

2.8 Trolling

Hawks (2013:2) observes that reading the comments below news articles reveals “the rotten wealth of trolls and other idiots who inhabit these forums”, adding that despite efforts to control them, trolls (and also spammers) are undermining the value of comments sections.

Chamorro-Premuzic (2014:1) defines trolling as “the act of posting disruptive or inflammatory comments online in order to provoke fellow readers” while Bartlett (2014:22) describes trolling as “any nasty or threatening behaviour online”. It is especially prevalent in online news comments, where a troll can be considered to be a “deliberately disruptive contributor” (Page, 2012:26) who takes part in order to cause outrage (Cook & Knight, 2013:115) and “spark an argument for the sake of an argument” (Jordan, 2013:13) just “for the fun of it” (Suler, 2016:341). Such comments do not promote dialogue and debate (Levinson, 2009:171) and the way in which trolls waste time by inciting arguments and responding in a predictable manner has become part of online culture, according to Reagle (2015:92)

The term *troll* was likely borrowed from the notion of trolling for fish with baited lines; the aphorism ‘don’t feed the trolls’ advises that one should ignore ‘flame bait’. (Reagle, 2015:95)

This is echoed by Levinson (2009:171), Suler (2016:342) and Chamorro-Premuzic (2014:2), who argue that since trolls aim to direct attention away from the debate towards themselves, starving the troll of attention and ignoring them is the only effective antidote to trolling behaviour. Coleman (2012:114) meanwhile points out that while the behaviour of trolls is mostly morally deplorable, it is not necessarily illegal.

Anderson et al. (2014:374) also define trolling as “flaming” and raise the question of whether such behaviour affects the opinions of “lurkers” - those who follow comments threads, but do not actively partake in them, and can be discouraged from returning due to the tone of the comments. The chief difference between flaming and trolling is that flaming often arises from an attempt at dialogue, regardless of how angry it becomes, while trolling can be seen as a deliberate attempt to stifle that dialogue (Levinson, 2009:171).

Trolls are mostly men, according to Reagle (2015:98). Research has shown that men attach more importance to their freedom of expression than they do the consequences for those they are addressing and therefore flame or troll in order to “regulate the social order” as they see it and have experienced it. (Reagle, 2015:102). Women also post fewer comments but can still be lurkers. Pierson (2014:1) analysed nearly one million comments on a US website and found only a quarter were made by women, even though 44% of the readers were female, meaning that the views expressed in comments sections were not necessarily those of all readers. Trolls are also especially offensive to newcomers to the Internet, who are not as technologically savvy or proficient in online etiquette, and their brash behaviour is most offensive to these people unfamiliar with this online world observes Coleman (2012:113).

Trolls have become a fully-fledged phenomenon, complete with codes of practice with the aim of deliberately subverting political correctness, and make a mockery of it. (Coleman, 2012:110). They can demonstrate a form of restraint in that there is an understanding that the trolling remains online and does not manifest in real life situations. Despite this, some suffer from an Internet condition, Chronic Troll Syndrome (CTS), which means they can’t differentiate between real life and the Internet, and what is appropriate or inappropriate interaction, resulting in real life outbursts (Coleman, 2012:112).

According to Chamorro-Premuzic (2014:2), research into trolling is still in its infancy, but psychological studies have found that trolls often display antisocial personality characteristics, finding enjoyment in intimidating or harming others, which is why this sort of behaviour can be considered a form of cyberbullying. Trolling also promotes narcissistic behaviour, as trolls feel important when they attract attention and upset people, thereby enhancing their troll status. As Suler (2016:341) observes:

In extreme cases, these sadistic people are either extremely narcissistic or psychopathic personalities who enjoy seeing others suffer, turning people against each other and creating chaos in the community. Lacking empathy and social conscience, they are driven by the need to control others while boosting their own feelings of being powerful and important...Similar to cyberbullies, some trolls often are 'turning the passive into the active' by doing unto others what was done to them in the past.

Suler (2016:341) describes how one troll had realised the way he abused people online stemmed from being abused as a child. However, some are psychopaths and lack the ability to see this, and empathy for those they are abusing online. There is little one can say or do to change the mind of a troll, as they are unwilling to engage in meaningful debate, but are rather consumed with anger and prejudice. Trying to reason with a troll can be frustrating as it will have little impact, and will often lead to a personal attack (Suler, 2016:341). Meanwhile, Binns (2012:557) cites an example of when the *Birmingham Post* invited one of its most prolific and critical online commenters to tour their newsroom, and found that he was more reasonable in real life than they had expected, and admitted that he had not grasped that real life people were affected by his online behaviour.

Bartlett (2014:22) interviewed a troll who insisted that trolling is not about bullying people, but “unlocking situations, creating new scenarios, pushing boundaries, trying ideas out, calculating the best way to provoke a reaction”. The troll’s technique would be to post a comment with intentional spelling or grammar mistakes in a forum, and when corrected, he would start an argument with them about politics. The idea is to “create a scene” in order to draw

attention to the issues being raised, regardless if this is successful. Trolling can thus be considered “part art, part science, part joke, part political act, but also more” according to Bartlett (2014:23). “Trolling is a culture, it’s a way of thinking,” the troll explained to Bartlett (2014:23). However, it can also become like a drug, in that you need a bigger and stronger hit each time, which means trolling can spiral out of control (Bartlett, 2014:32).

While most trolls are “simply bored teenagers trying to cause a little trouble”, many seem to follow a libertarian ideology about living in a free society where there is free expression. However, this can also justify bullying, argues Bartlett (2014:44).

Finding trolls can be difficult as they are adept at hiding their true identities, use different accounts and names, and mask their IP addresses. Once they are banned, they simply rejoin using a different e-mail account and name. They also often use private hideouts or channels or chat rooms, and spend time with other trolls, engaged in arguments or humorous exchanges (Bartlett (2014:23).

2.9 Free Speech

Everyone has the right to freedom of expression, which includes freedom of the press and other media; freedom to receive or impart information or ideas; freedom of artistic creativity; and academic freedom and freedom of scientific research. (South African Constitution, 1996:5)

The promotion of freedom of expression is one of the central pillars of the South African Constitution, even though these rights do not extend to propaganda, incitement of violence, or “advocacy of hatred that is based on race, ethnicity, gender or religion, and that constitutes incitement to cause harm” (Constitution, 1996:5). Meanwhile, the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights states:

Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to

seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers. (UN, 1948:1).

Russell (2011:140) points out these words have taken on a new relevance in the Internet era, and that the rise of citizen journalism will enable people to become not only consumers but also producers of news and opinions, thereby reinventing journalism. Thornburg (2011:32) argues that while the production and consumption of news has shifted, the fundamentals - such as the role of the news in a democracy and freedom of the press - have not changed, and the responsibility to report the truth remains paramount.

According to King (2010:196), attempts by the US government to define and regulate free speech on the Internet raised concerns that the free flow of information – one of the mainstays of online communication – would be compromised. As King (2010:267) observed, proponents of free speech believe that “the truth is more likely to emerge from a multitude of tongues”.

However, Sunyer (2014:2) argues that one of the biggest challenges for the future of the Internet is to what extent such freedom of speech and freedom of expression can be allowed, and to what extent it needs to be regulated and limited, in order to prevent hate speech or incitement. As websites and social media allow often unedited and unfiltered messages to be broadcast to a wide audience, the greater the potential for defamation and hate speech becomes (Lipschultz, 2015:158). This is further amplified by the international distribution of such unfiltered media, and means that “technological freedom as a trend is colliding with governmental, corporate, organizational and individual desires to control messages” (Lipschultz, 2015:159). As Adibe (2013:90) argues, free speech is not an absolute right, and must be balanced against other rights.

2.10 Hate speech

Lupton (2015:137) states that while the Internet allows for greater participatory democracy and freedom of expression, it also reproduces and exacerbates discrimination and hate speech, especially against minorities and disadvantaged social groups – even though members of these groups can themselves be trolls.

Online sites provide forums for the expression, reproduction and support of stigmatising and discriminatory statements that are aimed at social divisiveness rather than cohesiveness. Members of social minority groups tend to be subjected to far more hate speech, trolling, flaming, threats of violence and other forms of online harassment than are those who are part of the hegemonic social group. (Lupton, 2015:137)

Comments sections on news websites especially seem to attract racist hate speech, which has resulted in online publishers either preventing anonymous comments or shutting down comments sections altogether due to the amount of time and expense spent on trying to control this (Lupton, 2015:137). Thornburg (2011:326) states that codes of conduct should prohibit issues such as hate speech and threats, as such behaviour “has no place on news sites”. Lupton (2015:140) further states that threats and harassment are often trivialised and not always properly dealt with by authorities, even though this can have a significant emotional effect on victims and prevent marginalised groups from feeling they can engage in a digital space.

Pew Research Centre found that 40% of adults have experienced harassment online, while 73% have seen other people being harassed online. Most of the harassment consisted of being called offensive names or people trying to embarrass them, but there were also physical threats or stalking. While most of the harassment occurred on social media (66%), it was also prevalent in comments sections (22%) and gaming (16%). Severe harassment took a serious emotional toll on those who experienced it, the research found (Duggan, 2014:1).

The hate speech clause in South Africa’s Constitution shows a commitment to creating a culture of democracy, even though hate speech “has an undeniable potential to increase social tensions, the risk of violence and discrimination” (Azriel & Pillay, 2012:266). Dignity on both an individual or group level is an important determinant when trying to balance freedom of expression and hate speech. McKaiser (2014:1) argues that there is a big difference between unjustified censorship and banning hate speech, stating that hate speech is illegal and immoral, and banning it demonstrates an awareness that there are limits to freedom of expression.

Anonymous online bullies who trample on people's dignity don't deserve to have their illegal speech acts legitimated... there's no need to oxygenate illegal speech online if you have the technical capacity to stop it. (McKaiser, 2014:1)

Part of that technical capacity is moderating, or filtering out such hate speech.

2.11 Moderation

The challenge of deciding what comments to publish and whether they are suitable is nothing particularly new, as this can be compared to letters to a newspaper editor (Frost, 2011:174). Such letters would be vetted based on whether the points raised were salient and accurate, and whether the writer's identity could be verified (Thornburg, 2011:328). While the same standards can apply to moderating online comments, this can be time-consuming and conversations can also be suppressed while moderators vet and approve comments. Thornburg (2011:329) advises pre-moderation for "hot-button issues" such as race, religion, politics and even sport. There should also be guidelines in place for removing offensive comments or banning commenters, with explanations sent to the offenders in order to explain the reasoning for it, and hopefully "correct their behaviour" (Thornburg, 2011:329).

Most organisations have developed rules and guidelines for moderating comments, a report by the Ethics Advisory Committee of the Canadian Association of Journalists (2014:1) found. However, there remains little consensus on whether organisations have a legal obligation to moderate comments and would be liable for content on an open or a moderated forum. In terms of South African law, a publisher is liable for content that is pre-moderated as they have presumably checked and approved these comments (Huang, 2016:9). This is why *News24* and other publishers chose post-moderation, as they could argue they were merely providing a platform for comments and could disable any reported or problematic posts after the fact.

Moderation will also not necessarily curtail freedom of speech, as commenters have other avenues for expressing their opinions. Some guidelines for moderation include clear guidelines for commenting on stories and what is not allowed; encouraging users to express their views in a civil manner; getting journalists to interact and set the tone of the conversation; taking care when

opening comments on sensitive stories; and providing reasons for banning users. (Canadian Association of Journalists, 2014:2).

The recipe for moderating comments at most news organisations has been relatively straightforward, states Rolston (2015:2): “Moderate and rank posts, vet commenters, and design the forum with the threading and sharing features that streamline the user experience”. This can ensure that vulgar and irrelevant comments are minimised, and users are able to be part of the discussion – which can also lead to interesting comments which can add to the user experience. Organisations have experimented with different moderation techniques, such as rewarding some comment posters with moderator privileges or allowing comments only for a short period, as they see the importance of participating in and policing comments. But as Rolston (2015:5) points out, attempts by publications to reduce online incivility by policing bad comments and rewarding good behaviour, can lead to distrust of coverage and warped reading, changing perceptions of the story itself.

Thornburg (2011:325) cites the example of Gawker Media in the US, and how the Jezebel blog attracted negative comments. It then instituted a number of changes, such as giving the best commenters special privileges. Although the number of comments dropped initially, they picked up to eclipse the earlier number, once the comments section was better managed, with strict parameters and more engagement from journalists, thus showing that the set-up of a community affects the behaviour in the community (Thornburg, 2011:325).

The moderation of comments also challenges traditional media values and may impact on journalistic practice, resulting in newsroom tension. According to Robinson (2010:131), traditionalists seek to maintain a hierarchical relationship with readers, believing that journalists are authoritative figures and organisations need to reflect their institutional responsibility. Convergents, on the other hand, are generally younger and feel that there should be more interaction and that users should be given more freedom. This is essentially a pluralistic point of departure, as pluralists believe the media should operate without regulation or censorship, so that a plurality of opinions can be heard (Fourie, 2007:144), while the traditionalists can be seen subscribe to critical theory which endorses greater control over output. Despite this, convergers

still agree that editorial standards are necessary, and that good comments, which obey the rules, stay on topic and added new information, are beneficial to journalism (Robinson, 2010:134).

Comments that do not obey the rules can be removed, but this will merely result in commenters moving to other platforms such as Facebook or Twitter, where the larger environment will result in a “diffusion of responsibility” (Konnikova, 2013:5). Removing comments will also change the experience of the reader, as they will be less likely to engage with the topic and also share it with their friends. Instead of ignoring or disabling comments, publishers can fortify their commenting system, making it stronger and more resistant to abuse, such as filtering comments based on user ratings, moderating or meta-moderation, where the moderation of others can be rated as accurate or unfair. However, in such cases moderators can gang up against others and collude amongst each other at times, observes Reagle (2015:7).

Stipulations that real names be used are gaining ground, especially as this is key to joining social networking sites such as Facebook and Google+. Many companies (including *News24*) switched to Facebook’s Comments Box service precisely because of the real names requirement, which discourages users from flaming or saying anything that could be traced back to them. For example, when TechCrunch adopted Facebook comments, they saw a large drop in comments, but welcomed it, as there were fewer trolls and negative comments, and more useful and well argued comments (Reagle, 2015:9). Despite this, it is not foolproof, and fake profiles can be created.

There are however concerns that using centralised commenting systems such as Google, Facebook, Disqus or Livefyre gives these large companies access to users private data and more control, as well as restraining free anonymous speech (Reagle, 2015:9). Some have experimented with asking users to pay a fee to comment, or even limiting the numbers. Smaller commenting communities tend to work better as they treat their users as members of a community and generally have better comments. But they are also victims of their own success and there is pressure for them to grow. As Reagle (2015:11) observes, people seek intimacy and community in a network, but when it is tainted with trolls and spammers, they move to another site.

2.12 Summary

This chapter has given an overview of the environment in which online comments take place, and the nature of this type of user interaction. Issues that arise from this online form of communication, such as the formation of an online identity and how this differs from real life interaction, as well as the concept of anonymity, and how users can lose their inhibitions online and exhibit behaviour they would not ordinarily demonstrate, were considered. This deindividuation can result in posting offensive or disrupting content online, or trolling. This was examined in the context of the debate of free speech online, and where to draw the line at hate speech, which informs the debate on how to moderate such comments, and whether to keep comments open in the face of reputational and commercial risk. The theoretical framework through which these debates can be analysed will be considered next.

Chapter 3: Theoretical framework

3.1 Overview

McQuail (2010:13) defines theory as a set of ideas to help make sense of a phenomenon, and lists five kinds of theory relevant to mass communication: Social-scientific, cultural, normative, operational and everyday theory. This study will focus primarily on the normative and social-scientific theories. Comments can be analysed in terms of the public sphere, which falls under normative theory, while the critical political economy approach, part of media-society theory, as well as uses and gratifications theory and gate-keeping fall under social scientific theory.

Fourie (2007:115) argues that applying theoretical approaches to the study and research of mass communication can be difficult given the different ways of categorising theories and the ways in which paradigms can overlap. There are numerous theories and approaches relating to the media's role in society, all of which aim to depict, explain, interpret and appraise the power of the media and its effect on people and society in general (Fourie, 2007:116).

3.2 Normative theory

Online comments threads can foster a greater relationship between the media and users, according to Robinson (2010:132). This can be seen to subscribe to normative theory which argues that the media should ideally assist in fostering democracy and greater inclusion and interaction amongst citizens (Fourie, 2007:178). McQuail (2010:162) defines normative theory as the concepts of rights and responsibility that inform the public's expectation that the media serves a social purpose to benefit both individuals and society. Normative theories are mostly positivistic, stating norms and standards and applying these to the media, and what the media ought to do in society, rather than what it actually does.

Normative theory is by its nature subjective and most perspectives within this paradigm are from outside the media. As McQuail (2010:185) observes, the media are not generally sympathetic to normative theory as they "do not like to be told what they ought to be doing". Despite this, normative theory forms the yardstick against which media performance is measured (Fourie, 2007:185), and most national media policies are based on normative theory, ensuring

that media houses, especially public broadcasters, are able to fulfil their functions in a controlled and at the same time responsible way, by contributing to the development of society, by entertaining and educating its citizens, and by assuming a watchdog function over institutions of society (Fourie, 2007:178). Specific normative theories include libertarian, authoritarian, social responsibility and development theory (Fourie, 2007:179). This study is informed by the ideas of both social responsibility and development theory. Libertarianism promotes freedom of speech without clear boundaries and authoritarianism envisages a strong role for the government in the operation of the media.

Goss (2007:368) argues that the presence of comment threads on a news website links two valuable aspects of sociological propaganda, namely the concept of participatory democracy, and the use of technology. Comments can be normative in that they feature immediate publication and feedback, and even where there is disagreement and debate, such threads act as a “technologically-mediated flagship for democracy and citizen engagement that hovers over the disputes between engaged citizens” (Goss, 2007:368).

In defining the media as a societal and cultural phenomenon which plays a large role in the changing trends of society, McQuail (2010:80) argues that the ideas and information shared on the media are “evidently an important aspect of our culture”. This begs the question of whether comments sections, which form an increasingly bigger part of the media and will therefore have some impact on broader society, hold an accurate mirror to society. The fact that only a small percentage of Internet users actually participate in comments threads (Huang, 2016:11) also leads to questions about this metaphor. This will be further examined in the interview and survey responses.

3.3 The public sphere

According to Daniels and Hughey (2013:332), many websites opened comments on articles in the hope that the public sphere would be reinvigorated by such online debate, which would serve a normative purpose. German philosopher Jürgen Habermas considered the ideal public sphere to be a democratic, all-encompassing arena in which public debate can occur (Athique, 2013:195). Habermas (1989:236) traces the rise of the public sphere back to the salons

and coffee shops of seventeenth and eighteenth century Europe, where art and literature, and later politics and the economy, were discussed and debated, becoming “centres of criticism”. These meeting places facilitated social intercourse by ignoring class and status, enabled discussions on previously disregarded areas of concern, and established an inclusive sense of the public (Habermas, 1989:238). Leaning (2009:69) defines the modern public sphere as “an idealised, virtual or imagined space in which members of a community may communicate”. It has evolved into a concept rather than a geographical place, in which institutional control is undermined by a new form of civil association and the formation of public opinion. This deliberation between citizens, facilitated by the media, plays a central role in a healthy democracy and is where these public opinions can be formed and challenged. Rheingold (2012:240) argues that media freedom is important for such democracy, and the free flow of information must be two-sided: citizens must be informed, but also be able to influence policy, through civil and rational debate which leads to the formation of public opinion.

The rise of the mass media, and the vested commercial and political interests associated with it which tried to influence public opinion, led to concerns that the media was no longer an ideal forum for public debate. It became difficult to see the mass media as a public sphere as many media organisations exist for the purpose of profit, and cultural production is largely in their hands, not those of the public (Devereux, 2007:107). Habermas went so far as to propose regulation to ensure that citizens would be able to voice their own ideas in the face of the onslaught of advertising and public relations (Athique, 2013:196). However, areas such as talk radio, letters to the editor, and the subsequent rise of the Internet, where citizens could interact and share their own ideas without interference – were seen as forums for open debate in terms of the public sphere.

Leaning (2009:68) argues that the Internet can be considered “the saviour of the public sphere” as it revitalises ways in which communication can happen and public opinion can be shaped by shifting the power from the producer (such as a media company) to the user or consumer. Critics believed that technology and progressive “cyber-utopian” thinking could have a positive influence and promote democracy by invigorating civil society (Leaning, 2009:73). The Internet can be seen to facilitate the public sphere by rectifying open access to the means of

communication outside of prevailing media hegemony and encouraging open discussions in order to facilitate diverse public opinion (Leaning, 2009:76). Online features such as blogs and citizen journalism were seen to have transformational potential, by encouraging civic participation, revitalising politics and politicians, and challenging power structures. This can also be applied to online comment sections.

Lewis and Zamith (2014:562) argue that the public sphere is largely dependent on the quality of the discourse as well as the quality of the participation, and that free and open debate should be encouraged in order to attain the desired outcome of agreement. However, this is not always the case, especially given that access to such forums is not open, and it is still moderated. The issue of access is one of a number of factors which affect the Internet's ability to be an effective public sphere (Lewis & Zamith, 2014:564). These include:

- access to technology (the digital divide);
- incivility in online discussions;
- fragmentation (where comments can be disjointed and lost amongst irrelevant ones);
- selective exposure (where users ignore oppositional views);
- homogenisation (where a few users dominate a conversation while others are quiet).

As a result, Lewis and Zamith (2014:566) argue that the Internet may not be an extension of the public sphere which enhances democracy as Habermas envisioned, but rather a new forum for open discussion which facilitates more deliberation, but not necessarily more diverse deliberation.

Howard (2011:39) states that “media have become the public sphere”, and that while face-to-face human interaction is important, most political conversations take place online, so the public sphere is a “digitally mediated space” where values, problems and projects are discussed and debated (Howard, 2011:137). However, there are varying ideas on how the public sphere is impacted by digital media, according to Howard (2011:40), who argues that Habermas saw the

public sphere as an arrangement where people had access to the same information and which needed a physical space for interaction and debate.

This understanding of the public sphere originates from a different era, in which editors would filter stories according to what they thought was worthy of being published or broadcast, essentially controlling the information. Now, Internet users can control what information they are exposed to, by means of customising their online browsing and news feeds, and who they follow on social media, meaning that they may never be exposed to diverse opinions. It is furthermore structured differently to what Habermas described, as it has moved into digital and now even mobile technology (Howard, 2011:88). This raises the question of whether the online public sphere can exist (Howard, 2011:40). However, user comments, which are less open to control even though there is sometimes moderation, can still be seen as a space for an online public sphere.

While at first glance the Internet can be seen as a possible media-based public sphere, where users can engage in online discussions about a variety of topics which can be critical of the status quo, the reality is that there are differences between the promise and practise, and more Internet users search for pornography than matters of public concern, according to Devereux (2007:108). The Internet is also dominated by mass media corporations, and access to the Internet is not equal, especially in a developing country such as South Africa. This inequality in access to and use of communications technology is referred to as the digital divide (McQuail, 2010:97). Devereux (2007:108) argues that commercial interests have colonised the Internet and control access to it, as well as dictate certain content such as advertising and direct marketing. It is therefore important to be cautious when considering the Internet as a possible public sphere.

The internet retains the potential to operate as a public sphere. It has not, as of yet, realized that role. It cannot realistically be seen as a democratic space because access to the Internet is not equal. (Devereux, 2007:109)

While Internet access may not be readily available to the whole population, the Internet, especially digital media and social media, brings people of different cultures and ages together in

an ever present multicultural online network. But this public space still has competing hierarchies and values, where an individual competes with powerful media corporations who not only own the platform but also produce much of the content. Howard (2011:89) observes that despite this, the individual retains an element of power as they are able to control what they consume, and how they consume it, such as on a tablet, phone or computer.

According to Rheingold (2012:241), this democratisation of the media environment brought about by the Internet means that the notion of the public sphere and its subversion by powerful interests needs to be re-examined, so that it is “anchored in but not chained to Habermasian theory” (Rheingold, 2012:241). This can be seen in comments sections, which not only facilitate public engagement on various issues, but also provide a place to examine the construction of public discourse within these communities (McDermott, 2016:15). In theory, comments sections can represent the ideal public sphere forum by enabling public discussion and engagement, especially perspectives that are under-represented in mainstream media coverage. But in practice, they can be “much more messy than the civil, rational and orderly discussions that Habermas envisioned as characterizing a democratic public sphere” (McDermott, 2016:16).

While the Internet opened up these new interpretations of the public sphere, many have abandoned this idealised view of it in the face of a huge amount of offensive comments, and instituted various forms of moderation to control these uncivil comments. Weber (2014:954) argues that comments sections on online news articles do not necessarily contribute to an improved public sphere, even though there is the possibility of debates between people of opposing views, particularly over controversial issues. Such discourse is also dependent on a large number of users commenting on an issue, and also coming back to read responses and comment again, Weber (2014:952) observes.

Such moderation and control has also hampered research into issues such as racism in an online environment. As Daniels and Hughey (2013:336) note, moderation which disallows racist commentary results in “whitewashed data”, which hides the racism which inevitably crops up in comments, presenting an ideal image of the public sphere but not necessarily a realistic one. Moderating comments obscures racism and it will surface in other virtual venues, they state.

Nonetheless, examples of “coded racial language” with subtle racism, sometimes slip through moderation, and can be analysed, Daniels and Hughey (2013:344) reasoned.

Leaning (2009:72) argues that the public sphere has been subject to criticism and revision. Critics have seen it as exclusive and elitist in that only those with the education and means to participate were able to do so. This is especially true in South Africa, where there are barriers of education, language and access to information. The ideal public sphere should also cater for a variety of opinions in a pluralist society. Habermas later acknowledged that multiple public spheres were possible.

According to Mouffe (1999:746), the public sphere model, with its focus on deliberative democracy and equitable, rational debate, fails to acknowledge that power and antagonism play a central role in such discourse. Conflict and agonistic confrontation should not be eliminated from the rational debate that Habermas envisioned, but should be seen as important components of debate, as can perhaps be seen in heated comments threads. “A democratic society makes room for the expression of conflicting interests and values,” Mouffe (1999:758) observed.

One of the greatest barriers to seeing the Internet as a public sphere is the fragmented and partisan nature of online communities, Leaning (2009:78) stated. These power relations within online groups, as well as commercial interests stifling free comment (through comment moderation or access to comment) and strict regulation of what is posted, raise concerns about the Internet and the public sphere. As a result, the Internet can be seen to work in conjunction with the mass media in developing and promoting discourse, but it can fragment politics and can hamper the facilitation of the public sphere (Leaning, 2009:76).

Despite these concerns, the Internet can still enable people to create interactive ways of communicating with each other as opposed to the one-way flow in commercial media, and therefore has potential to re-establish a public sphere free of media control (Leaning, 2009:81) and offer alternative channels of communication which can be employed to “challenge the orthodoxy of hegemonic discourse” (Leaning, 2009:83). Lewis and Zamith (2014:562) point out that the public sphere has been criticised as being too romanticised and idealised, and has

perhaps never actually existed. It should therefore be seen more as a metaphor for the perfect and normative form of public participation and interaction.

3.4 The critical approach

Critical thinking into mass communication examines criticism of the political or economic abuse of the media, and centres on mass society theory, in which the media is seen to have the power to influence and corrupt people's minds, as well as initiate social chaos and trivialise culture. (Fourie, 2007:124). It is inspired by Marxism, in that the media are seen to be a pervasive ideological agent. Critical theorists are most interested in the media's "ideological manipulation of the masses and the capitalistic use and misuse of the media by owners to foster capitalist values" (Fourie, 2007:130).

The media are seen to mostly support the political, economic, social and cultural interests of one group at the expense of another. The term political economy refers to theories and approaches which attempt to understand how these interests impact social institutions as well as social transformation and development. (Fourie, 2007:135). However, it must be borne in mind that the media can also play a normative role and can inform and educate audiences, thereby playing an important democratic role.

3.5 Critical political economy

The decision to close comments can be analysed through the political economy approach, which can be seen as an umbrella term for the various theories examining the impact of power relationships on the media (Fourie, 2007:135). Boyd-Barrett (1995:186) states that the political economy approach is largely critical, focusing on media ownership and management and its relations with political and economic elites, as well as the consequences of commercialisation and diversification on the media product. The media can be seen to be part of the capitalist economic system and support the economic or political interests of one group to the detriment of another, reflecting this in the content that is produced (Fourie, 2007:135).

Media owners are largely focused on increasing audience numbers in order to attract more advertising and thereby, more profit. The capitalist economic system involves mass

production and distribution, cost efficiency and division of labour, all of which impacts on media content and results in fewer sources and independent voices, not always catering for small or marginalised groups, and focusing on pandering to mass audience appeal by covering popular stories before important public affairs stories (Fourie, 2007:136). Major sources of news are also limited to corporate interests (through public relations) or governments, all of which can manipulate the message they want to get across.

McQuail (2010:218) argues that the mass media is “not just any other business”, as its activities are economic and political, while also being dependent on rapidly changing technology. It produces goods and services for both private and public consumption, playing a role in the functioning of society but also having to operate according to the dictates of market economics. This means that media organisations have to survive in a competitive environment and are subject to financial discipline and cost constraints regardless of whether they are publicly or privately financed. The media has therefore become more of an industry than an institution of society (McQuail, 2010:218). As with any other industry, media organisations can be seen to have three general goals:

1. maximising profit;
2. reducing costs, by improving efficiency and streamlining operations; and
3. reducing risk, by asserting some control over their environment (Croteau & Hoynes, 2006:118).

In the case of *News24*, closing comments could be seen as a way to reduce risk by avoiding possible legal action over comments published on the website.

Ward (1995:124) sees the media as mostly privately-owned commercial enterprises that can be bought and sold, and have to return profit to their shareholders by providing content which appeals to audiences and advertisers, meaning they are more in the entertainment than the news or public service business. The media sells access to audiences to advertisers, and advertisers will pay the most to reach the audiences most likely to buy their products (Ward, 1995:139). The realisation that the media’s foremost product can actually be seen to be the

audience, and that this shapes the content and behaviour of the recipient, led to a variation of the political economic approach from primarily focusing on media as an economic entity which affects content to focusing on the way in which it effectively sells customers to advertisers, according to McQuail (2010:96).

This focus on profit can thus have a detrimental effect on the quality of the product offered to audiences. Croteau and Hoynes (2003:34) point out that the economics of the mass media means that media ownership, the impact of advertising, complex production processes and the historically specific context in which people create media products all have a significant impact on the final message. Financial constraints, such as cost-cutting measures, result in a decrease in journalists and production staff, less diverse coverage, and news which is oriented more towards the elites with a bigger spending power (Croteau & Hoynes, 2003:62).

Because media organisations are ultimately businesses, this means that media owners and managers often directly involve themselves in decisions which affect the operation and profitability of the organisation. These decisions include company structure, marketing strategy; staff numbers, appointing key staff such as editors; investments in new technologies and attempts to achieve synergies with other organisations under the same ownership (Ward, 1995:140). Owners are also more likely to make appointments on the basis of having similar social or political views, which will then have an effect on editorial direction (Ward, 1995:142), raising concerns about editorial independence and possible political influence. The power associated with ownership is only potentially harmful when concentrated or used to limit or deny access to the media, and this is the fundamental tension between economic influences such as market size and profit, and social-cultural criteria such as quality and influence (McQuail, (2010:227).

In order to understand the media industry, the underlying economic dynamics and the extra-economic role played by the media in a democratic society need to be explored, through the market model and the public sphere model (Croteau & Hoynes, 2006:17). The market model treats the media like any other goods and services, and suggests that a relatively unregulated process of exchange based on supply and demand best meets society's needs. Markets offer a number of overlapping advantages where there is robust competition, such as efficiency, responsiveness, flexibility and innovation (Croteau & Hoynes, 2006:18). The public sphere

model suggests that the market system is not enough for society's needs, and the concept of the public interest should also be used along with profitability to assess the performance of the media (Croteau & Hoynes, 2006:22). The government thus can be seen to have an important role to play in ensuring that the media meets the needs of citizens and not just consumers.

The public sphere model shows some of the shortcomings of the market model, in that markets are seen as undemocratic, reproducing inequality, being amoral by having no judgement; and not necessarily meeting social or democratic needs (Croteau & Hoynes, 2006:24).

The ownership of media production and distribution is therefore a central tenet of the critical political economy approach, which argues that the affiliations and ideologies of corporate owners can shape the content and its ideological power. This can have a negative effect on society as a whole, by misinforming the public or creating a artificial sense of awareness, thereby undermining democracy (Fourie, 2007:138).

This contradicts the notion of the public sphere, in which the media can be seen to serve the public good by promoting interaction and democracy. The Internet can be seen as a possible public sphere, and able to weaken this consolidation and domination by media owners. However, it is still constrained by the ability to access the technology and connectivity to go online, as well as the fact that many major media companies own websites, such as Media24's ownership of *News24*.

3.6 Positivistic theories

Online comments, and the motivations of those who comment online, can also be analysed in terms of the uses and gratifications theory. Atkin, Jeffres, Neuendorf, Lange and Skalski (2005:319) state that Internet users actively look for and consume media content in order to gratify needs such as entertainment, identity, diversion and surveillance. Accordingly, they argue that these needs create a better understanding of the Internet as a "two-way interactive medium". Spending a large amount of time online increases a user's gratification or satisfaction. Theorists argued that users could bring their real life social habits to the online space, and while those who have no fear of isolation post more, those who have a high fear of being isolated could be considered to be "lurkers" or those who observe but don't contribute (Lipschultz, 2015:41).

Participating in certain forums also contributes to a sense of identity or belonging for certain Internet users.

According to Lipschultz (2015:42), computer mediated communication allowed people to create online communities, even if these weren't as real and fulfilling as face-to-face interactions, and this could lead to misunderstandings and negative experiences, such as "flame war" fights online. However, such interaction also enabled people to overcome real-life limitations such as appearance and shyness, which mark real-life interaction. Lipschultz (2015:42) argues that those who have a preference for online social interaction could also have underlying psychological or psychosocial issues, depression and loneliness, and that such a preference is related to problematic Internet use. "In other words, CMC is a tool that may lead people with problems to take these into online environments, rather than, as is often assumed, the negative effects being caused by online usage." (Lipschultz, 2015:41).

Meanwhile, the moderation of comments can be considered to be a form of gate-keeping. McQuail (2010:558) sees gate-keeping as the selection and processing of news, while Nielsen (2013:471) defines gate-keeping as the process whereby editors or journalists filter news stories according to what they deem to be newsworthy. The interactivity of the Internet has challenged this top-down approach, with anonymous and unmoderated online comments threatening the role of journalists and their ability to be gatekeepers. However, McQuail (2010:558) points out that the criteria used for gate-keeping are important, as potential bias may arise. Bias is the deviation from a neutral and impartial frame of reference as a result of a variety of personal factors, and can be either intentional or unintentional (McQuail, 2010:549). Bias can be described as "a predilection towards certain kinds of experience and ways of mediation", according to McQuail (2010:127). For instance, when editorial staff members are required to moderate comments, their own sets of values and beliefs are likely to influence how they respond to a comment, and whether they allow or disallow it.

Reader (2012:496) observes that unlike in the past where editors would select which letters are published, gate-keeping is largely absent in online forums, as most people can post what they like - unless of course there is pre-moderation. Levinson (2009:20) argues that while a blogger or website manager may not be subject to anyone else's gate-keeping, they essentially

become a gatekeeper when they decide which comments they will or will not allow on their site, and also how to moderate these comments. Comments that one moderator may deem offensive may be considered useful to others.

Mabweazara (2013:6) argues that the rise of participatory journalism has resulted in a rapidly increased flood of information, which increases the burden of moderating comments and raises questions about whether gatekeepers are even needed if the gates are no longer in place. Singer (2009:128) states that a journalist's gate-keeping role focuses on deciding both on the quantity and quality of information, especially assessing the quality according to a commonly held definition of what news should be. The same can be said for the process of moderating comments, which requires judgement calls about the quality of comments and whether to allow them or delete them. This can sometimes be an arbitrary process, as in some organisations there are no set rules in place about moderating comments and banning users for transgressing guidelines, observed Canter (2013:611). However, formal administration of an online community and the presence of an "assertive moderator" can improve user engagement while also providing guidance and laying out rules relating to mutual respect for diverse viewpoints, according to Robinson (2010:128).

3.7 Summary

This chapter has considered the various theories which can be applied to this case study of *News24's* decision to close comments. Firstly, comments can be analysed from a normative perspective, as they can serve a social purpose by assisting in the advancement of democracy through interaction and deliberation. This online debate can also be seen as part of an online public sphere, where members of society are able to exchange ideas and discuss the news stories appearing above the comments section. The Internet revitalised online deliberation without the interference of gatekeepers such as editors and media organisations. Despite concerns about online access and the nature of some of the submissions, online comments were seen as a place for debate and engagement. The decision to close comments can also be analysed critically, using the political economy theory which examines the impact of power relationships on the media end product. Political economy focuses on media owners and managers, and how their relationships with political and economic elites, as well as commercial constraints, can

potentially undermine the public sphere in the quest for profit. Positivistic theories which can be employed in the study of online comments include uses and gratifications theory, which examines the reasons for users commenting online, as well as gatekeeping, which considers how the moderation of comments can result in affect the ideal of an open public debate.

Chapter 4: Methodology

4.1 Overview

This chapter will introduce the research methodologies that were used for this case study. Anderson (2012:13) states that a methodology is a set of standardised practices used in the production of knowledge, including an epistemological foundation and rules of evidence which assist the researcher in attaining that knowledge.

According to Du Plooy (2009:42) the ways in which we acquire knowledge about a specific phenomenon are linked to the assumptions (such as ontology, epistemology, theoretical and methodological) which underlie the different research processes and procedures. These assumptions are interlinked, and influence theoretical explanations and the choice of which research design to use, as well as impacting on the interpretation of the findings. The scientific method is most commonly used in research as it is:

- empirical (it can be perceived and measured);
- cumulative and systematic (building on previous research and following a logical order);
- objective (by eliminating subjective judgements);
- predictive (it relates the present to the future);
- public (data is freely available to other researchers) (Du Plooy, 2009:17).

The scientific method has given rise to a number of different approaches to communication research, with the two dominant processes or techniques through which researchers approach a problem and seek answers being qualitative and quantitative research methodologies. This chapter will also consider how the triangulation approach, incorporating both these methodologies, can be applied to this research.

This study is empirical in that it uses primary data such as interviews and a questionnaire in an attempt to gain a better understanding of how the subjects relate to and understand the research problem (Anderson, 2012:13). It can be seen as critical research in that it aims to expose the underlying power relationships and mechanisms of control behind the decision (Anderson,

2012:15). The study will feature quantitative research through content analysis of the reactions of users to *News24*'s decision to close comments.

4.2 Qualitative research

According to Priest (1996:5), qualitative research methods examine topics which cannot easily be summarised numerically, unlike quantitative research which focuses on numbers or statistics. Qualitative evaluation describes and evaluates the performance of programmes being studied in their natural setting, focusing rather on the process of implementation instead of the quantifiable outcomes (Mouton, 2001:161). Qualitative research uses data collection methods such as case studies, in-depth interviews, field observation and focus groups, all of which use different questioning methods in order to try and understand and explain the underlying reasons and motives underpinning the research topic (Du Plooy, 1991:67). Given that this is a case study, and examines the reactions and perceived impact of the decision to close comments, the qualitative approach is preferred.

Qualitative research methodology has its roots in Karl Marx's theory of historic materialism and criticisms of ideological power by philosophers and politicians during the late nineteenth century (Du Plooy, 2009:30). In the 1930s the Frankfurt School helped promote an alternative view of dominant mass culture, providing an intellectual base for analysing mass communication as manipulative and oppressive, subverting views that opposed the dominant capitalist class interests. It also saw the ideas, art and symbols produced as commodities (McQuail, 2010:67). The first half of the twentieth century gave rise to ethnography and ethnomethodology, or the understanding of the behaviour of individuals within the framework of their experiences (Du Plooy, 2009:31). This led to modernists arguing that the knowledge could be acquired through the eyes of those who experience it, and that knowledge and truth about reality can be constructed, but not discovered (Du Plooy, 2009:31). Critical theory based on neo-positivism, neo-Marxism and materialism developed from this. Mass media messages were decoded in terms of ideological meanings constructed by the interests and social situation of the recipients. Symbolic interactionism focused on the meanings associated with symbol systems exchanged during communication, with research centring on meaning, language and cultural experiences in social contexts. This primarily involved case studies and in-depth analyses of

methods such as interviews, observations and documented communication, with raw data being collected in non-numerical form. (Du Plooy, 2009: 34).

Dominick and Wimmer (2006:49) argue that the advantages of qualitative research methods are that they enable the researcher to study behaviour in a natural setting; they are generally flexible and can adapt according to the nature of the research; and they enable the researcher to increase their depth of understanding on the topic. In this study, these advantages were apparent, in that the research subjects were in a natural setting at work, and the purpose of this research is to analyse the impact on both the company and public debate of the decision to close comments.

However, there are some disadvantages to qualitative research methods (Dominick & Wimmer, 2006:49). These include the small sample sizes which can result in an inability to generalise data and achieve data reliability, where a single researcher can lose their objectivity by becoming too closely involved with the study or the respondents. In this study, this was especially pertinent as the sample size was limited by the number of *News24* editorial staff who were directly involved in the moderation of comments, and the management team involved in the decision to shut comments. Also, objectivity was a concern as this researcher is part of this editorial team and was closely involved in the moderation of comments, but not the management decision to close them.

4.3 Quantitative research

Quantitative research involves the measurement of a quantity or amount, which is interpreted or analysed in an unbiased manner, such as through the use of statistics or mathematics. Most quantifiable data is numerical, and based on observation. It is also known as positivist or empirical research, due to its scientific underpinnings (Du Plooy, 1991:67). One of the biggest differences between qualitative and quantitative methods is that quantitative research uses representative sampling techniques which lead to results which can be generalised to the population from which the respondents are selected (Dominick & Wimmer, 2006:50). Quantitative research methods measure variables numerically, which allows more precision in

reporting results, and include the use of surveys and standardised questionnaires for data collection (Dominick & Wimmer, 2006:50).

Quantitative research methodology has its roots in positivism in seventeenth-century Europe, with Auguste Comte being regarded as the true founder of this field of research (Du Plooy, 2009:22) Positivism emerged as a philosophical system which applies objective, universal laws to the study of human communication, restricting itself to data and rejecting any form of speculation. Quantitative research, especially of the mass media, was seen as a solution for social problems, particularly in the USA. The Chicago School, based at the University of Chicago in the early twentieth century, saw the mass media as having the ability to restore moral unity, foster cohesion while also promoting democracy (Du Plooy, 2009:22). The view of the media began to shift during the middle part of the twentieth century, with fewer social theorists seeing the media as having a strong or direct influence on audiences, and adopting a more liberal pluralist view of society, in which elites were no longer considered to control industrial society. A structural functionalist approach was adopted, in which the media were regarded as a sub-system of society, with internal and external relations and providing continuity and integration, according to Du Plooy (2009:24).

Research into the mass media was largely evaluated according to the positivist approach during the middle parts of the twentieth century, with sociologist Harold Laswell regarding mass communication as a process which consisted of linear consequences (Du Plooy, 2009:25). He also saw the main functions of communication in society being surveillance of the environment, correlation of the parts of society, and the transmission of cultural heritage (McQuail, 2010: 98). In the 1940s, the second phase of effects studies resulted in the questioning of assumptions that the mass media had direct effects on the audience and led to changes in attitudes, and led to the view that mass media have limited effects on the audience. This gave rise to the two-step flow model, which took into account the influence of informal and interpersonal communication, meaning that audiences were no longer seen as being unconnected, and that social relationships could influence how people received and relayed mass media messages (Du Plooy, 2009:26).

Continuing from this, the uses and gratifications approach considers how audiences have differing individual needs, and therefore different uses of mass media and different levels of gratification (Du Plooy, 2009:26).

According to (Du Plooy, 2009:28), the assumptions that guide the way in which researchers acquire knowledge and guide research designs include:

- validity (approximating reality as closely as possible);
- reliability (consistently obtaining valid knowledge);
- applied research (research designed to understand or solve an issue);
- basic research (research done to analyse theoretical relationships);
- reach and responses (surveys analysing the numbers of people exposed to a mass media message); and
- numerical form (reliable data from surveys, experiments and analyses which is expressed in numbers).

4.4 Triangulation/Mixed methods

Dominick and Wimmer (2006:50) state that while there has been a degree of friction between the qualitative and quantitative research methods, there is now a realisation that both methods are required in order to fully understand a particular phenomenon. The term triangulation, which originated from the marine navigational system of using different signals to establish a ship's precise location, can now be used to describe the use of both these methods in media research.

Anderson (2012:75) argues that mixed methods relates to the combination of methods, and that normally one is dominant over the other. Anderson (2012:75) further argues that critical issues can be raised if research methods “are removed from their epistemological moorings and are treated as if they were simple tools”. There are also concerns about the convergence and corroboration of results, and where results should sit, because part of the data is based on the researcher's interpretation. Results should therefore be constructed through the data, and “the claim for convergence, therefore, is a claim based on the insight of the author, not on the necessity of the evidence” (Anderson, 2012:76).

Trochim (2006:1) refers to the qualitative-quantitative debate as “much ado about nothing”, explaining that both research methods are based on rich and varied traditions arising from multiple disciplines and both can address almost any research topic. The debate is more philosophical as opposed to methodological, and social research is richer due to the views and methods the debate has generated. While there is little difference at the data level between the two methods, there are profound differences regarding the epistemological and ontological assumptions about research, and this is what leads to the debate (Trochim, 2006:5). Despite this, the similarities can lead to new levels of interpretation, as Trochim (2006:3) observes:

The line between qualitative and quantitative is less distinct than we sometimes imagine. All qualitative data can be quantitatively coded in an almost infinite variety of ways. This doesn't detract from the qualitative information. We can still do any kinds of judgmental syntheses or analyses we want. But recognising the similarities between qualitative and quantitative information opens up new possibilities for interpretation that might otherwise go unutilized.

In this study, it is clear that a comparative analysis of the two research methods would have to be based on the process of measurement and the type of information received and how these would best provide answers to the research question. A quantitative researcher would ask specific questions in order to get unbiased numerical data, while a qualitative researcher would ask broader questions in order to get a holistic understanding of the research problem and interpret it accordingly. It is apparent that there are elements of both methodologies which could be applied in order to address the research question.

4.5 Case studies

A case study is an empirical inquiry conducted in order to explain or comprehend a particular phenomenon or situation in its existing real-life context, using a number of available data sources, according to Dominick and Wimmer (2006:136). It is different to an experiment in

that it studies something in its real-life context as opposed to separating it from that, and can reveal more detailed information than a survey can. Case studies are:

- particularistic, as they focus on a particular phenomenon;
- descriptive, in that they result in a detailed description of the study focus;
- heuristic, as they seek new interpretations or perspectives of the study topic; and
- inductive, in that they use inductive reasoning to seek to find new relationships or meanings (Dominick & Wimmer, 2006:136).

Rosenberry and Vicker (2009:76) define a case study as a “descriptive analysis of characteristics surrounding a particular case or situation”. It can be seen as an attempt to collect all the information about a subject over a period of time. They are often used to analyse how organisations handled crises or challenging situations over a certain time period. It is for this reason that a case study was chosen to explore *News24*’s decision to close comments.

There are some notable disadvantages to case studies, according to Dominick and Wimmer (2006:138), the first being concerns about the standard of research and scientific rigour, when research is badly planned and biased views influence the findings. The findings may not be open to generalisation across a broader population, if that is the goal of the study. Case studies are also time-consuming and the information can be difficult to summarise. Mouton (2001:150) argues that potential bias on the part of the researcher is a chief source of error, and has been borne in mind given this researcher’s close proximity to the subjects and to the topic at hand.

4.6 Data gathering

4.6.1 Interviews

Interviews are used in most qualitative research due to their ability to delve deeply into subjective realities, and can be seen as a *view* of something between (*inter*) people (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002:170). According to Priest (1996:26) an interview can be defined as an “open-ended conversational exploration of an individual’s worldview or some aspect of it”. Interviews are not as structured as a survey questionnaire, and researchers normally start with a list of questions but

can ask follow-up questions or rephrase them, as well as ask clarifying questions on certain points that are raised.

Reagan (2006:97) states that a personal interview is especially valuable when the interviewee is able to interact with the interviewer and provide more information or data than was foreseen. An interviewer should have good conversation skills and be able to ask questions in an open, easy going and trustworthy way, in order to achieve the best responses (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002:183). However, the interviewer needs to be aware of interviewer bias, as even the smallest gestures such as a nod of the head, or the tone of their voice, could possibly influence the response. The presence of recording devices can also distract interviewees, although it is preferable to record interviews as it is difficult to remember everything that was said (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002:187).

Interviewees are not always entirely neutral, and what emerges from the interview process is “the participants’ rhetorical construction of their experience”, according to Lindlof and Taylor (2002:173). Priest (1996:26) argues that it is important that the researcher does not impose their own worldview and dominate the interview process, but gain a full understanding of the interviewee’s perspective. Dominick and Wimmer (1991:108) also argue that the interviewer must “tread lightly” when asking personal or sensitive questions, as their physical presence can have an influence on the interviewee and make them less likely to answer fully.

Questions need to be well thought out and effective, as this can make or break the interview process (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002:194), and also need to be brief and concise so that the interview does not take too long to complete, according to Cottle, Hansen, Negrine and Newbold (1998:239). While the ideal face-to-face interview can take 45 minutes, others participating in research are less likely to want to give as much of their time, and therefore the researcher needs to focus on the most important areas in order to get the most out of the respondent.

Interview schedules ensure that all interviewees receive the same questions in the same way, ensuring uniformity. An interview guide is more informal, with more general questions and topics that an interviewee can work from, enabling the researcher to ask unscheduled questions and take the interview process in a different direction. This is particularly useful in tailoring the

interview questions according to the expertise and experience of different interviewees (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002:195). Questions should ideally be non-directive, in order to avoid respondents giving responses that they think the interviewer wants to hear. The grand tour question, which asks about an activity or event from start to finish, is usually the best way to establish a line of questioning, enabling the interviewee to take the interviewer along the journey as they've experienced it (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002:195). Closing questions are useful to tie up loose ends and also ask follow-on questions from remarks that may have arisen during the interview. By having developed trust, the respondent may be more willing to offer additional insight and opinions on certain issues. Parting comments should also be considered, as respondents often don't acknowledge the official ending of an interview, according to Lindlof and Taylor (2002:204).

The main advantages of in-depth interviews are that they are unique and can be customised according to the respondent, as well as the amount of information and detail they provide, especially on controversial or sensitive issues which cannot easily be understood using a traditional survey method (Dominick & Wimmer, 2006:135). This was the reason this method was used when interviewing different members of the *News24* management team, so that the questions could be tailored to their specific knowledge and experience. However, interviews can also be longer and can therefore elicit detailed explanations and more information about the respondent's opinions and experiences, and can thus be time-consuming and costly (Reagan, 2006:97). Interviews can also be generalised, with non-random samples, while different respondents may be asked different questions or different versions of the same questions. The issue of interviewer bias is also a disadvantage, as interviewees may subconsciously or consciously convey their attitudes and types of responses they are seeking (Dominick & Wimmer, 2006:136).

Four semi-structured interviews were conducted with key members of the *News24* management team, based on the research questions laid out in Chapter 1.

There were some limitations in that significant management changes occurred during this period. Former 24.com General Manager, Geoff Cohen, resigned on August 14, 2015 (*Fin24*, 2015) – three weeks before the comments decision was announced. Editor-in-chief Andrew

Trench resigned from *News24* on February 3, 2016 (*News24*, 2016) to join *TimesLIVE*, and did not respond to interview requests about the management deliberations leading to the decision. His successor, Adriaan Basson, was editor-in-chief of Media24's Afrikaans news platform *Netwerk24* at the time, and given that *Netwerk24* had faced similar challenges, he was briefed on the decision to close comments, and as a result, his insights on the management considerations informing the decision were deemed relevant to the study.

The following interviews were conducted:

- Adriaan Basson, editor, *News24*
- Aneeqah Emeran: Social Media Editor, *News24*
- Bevan Lakay: (former) Community Manager, *News24*
- Cathryn Reece: (former) Head of Product, *News24*

4.6.2 Surveys/Questionnaires

According to Anderson (2012:218), a survey or questionnaire is the most commonly used form of metric protocol, and aims to examine what properties and attributes exist in the chosen field of research. Surveys seek to “generate numerical data or discursive information in response to a research problem that requires the description of the properties of some entity or entities,” writes Anderson (2012:219). Cottle et al (1998:225) state that a survey aims to provide empirical data from a set population on a range of topics or attitudes, while Reagan (2006:92) describes a survey as a “comprehensive examination of a population using a random sample, assessing variables for the purposes of describing or finding relations in that population”. *News24* editorial staff who had been involved in the moderation of comments, and general discussions about how best to approach comments, were selected and mailed a SurveyMonkey questionnaire in order to assess their opinions and perceptions about the decision to close comments and its impact.

There are different types of questions to ask in a survey: open ended questions which are mostly used in interviews, can be used if there is space. They allow a respondent to explain why they chose a particular answer, which can provide valuable flexibility and result in answers that

were possibly not foreseen. However, they can be time-consuming to analyse and require coding and content analysis. Meanwhile, closed-ended questions are popular in that they are easier to analyse, but can lack the unexpected responses (Dominick & Wimmer, 2006:181). Cottle et al (1998:229) argue that compromises need to be made as it is impossible to ask an unlimited number of questions, and it is also unlikely that every person will respond. In the design of the SurveyMonkey questions sent to *News24* staff, a combination of both were included, with some yes/no/maybe responses prefacing an option to explain further.

Questions need to be brief and concise so that the survey does not take too long to complete, according to Cottle et al (1998:239). Dominick and Wimmer (1991:108) argue that the questions must clearly state the desired information, and must be worded in such a way as to enable respondents to answer in the best way possible. Anderson (2012:218) points out that questions and the format of the survey need to assist in the easy handling of data, and also be appealing and accessible to respondents in order to reduce respondent error and frustration, as one of the biggest problems with this data collection method is the return rate of surveys.

Internet surveys are increasingly popular as they are easy to conduct and inexpensive, according to Dominick and Wimmer (2006:203) and Reagan (2006:102). However, there can be drawbacks to Internet surveys as there is little control over who ends up completing the survey or the data gathering procedures, which can affect the results. In this study, requests with a link to the SurveyMonkey website were only e-mailed to a select group of people so it was assumed that they would have completed it and not got somebody else to. There are also concerns that subjects don't respond, regardless of how easy it is, because e-mails are easily ignored and may go into a spam filter (Rosenberry & Vicker, 2009:30) and some may not be able to due to constraints such as lack of computer or Internet access – which in itself can affect how representative the sample is of the broader population (Reagan, 2006:102). In this research, the sample was limited to staff members of *News24* who have computer and Internet access at work, and were able to respond during working hours. The return rate was around half: 26 invitations were sent and 16 responded but only 12 fully completed the survey.

Other factors to consider when carrying out Internet surveys include ensuring that the target sample receive the questionnaire and are able to access it on their specific computer or

browser; that the survey is simple and easy to use and follows a logical progression; that there is adequate space for responses; and that there are filters in place to prevent people responding twice, or the wrong person responding (Reagan, 2006:104).

Surveys have a number of advantages, in that they examine a situation in a realistic setting rather than in artificial conditions such as in a laboratory, and a large amount of data can be collected. They are also cheaper and easier to conduct, and are not constrained by physical presence, as they can be undertaken online or by telephone (Dominick & Wimmer, 2006:179).

However, there are some disadvantages, such as the fact that badly worded surveys can bias results, and that the wrong respondents can be targeted, or not respond at all. This means that it is difficult to determine whether there is a causal or non-causal relationship between certain variables. Surveys can also be difficult to conduct, with a low response rate or not being able to get the best respondents to participate (Dominick & Wimmer, 2006:179). It is “virtually impossible” to achieve a full response rate, and with online surveys the general click-through rate (meaning a respondent clicks on the survey link to start a survey) is from 1-30%, state Dominick and Wimmer (2006:205). The higher the response rate the better, as less bias is likely to emerge, but the researcher must also examine patterns in the responses to eliminate possible bias, for instance what groups of people mostly participated and what groups did not?

4.7 Data analysis

4.7.1 Content analysis

Another methodology used in this study is content analysis, in order to quantify the public responses *News24*'s decision to close comments had received. Reagan (2006:94) states that content analysis is a survey of content rather than people. Instead of conducting interviews or a questionnaire, a researcher gathers content and then analyses that. It can be described as the systematic collection, description and analysis of media content (Priest, 1996:66) and is usually done by assigning categories to the information (Rosenberry & Vicker, 2009:74). The goals of content analysis are similar to sampling. Components of content analysis include defining the topic; the units of analysis; choosing a sample; creating categories for coding; and analysis and findings (Rosenberry & Vicker, 2009:74). This examination and analysis is done in a systematic,

objective and quantitative manner. It is systematic in that there are clearly defined rules relating to selecting the sample and evaluating it. Researchers also need to maintain objectivity and avoid possible bias, and must aim to produce quantitative, precise findings that can be easily interpreted and summarised (Dominick & Wimmer, 2006:150).

However, content analysis can have some limits, including time and cost, the challenges of finding relevant material to analyse, and the fact that it cannot be the only basis for making findings about the effects of the content that is under review. The analysis can also be limited by the framework and tools of measurement in the study (Dominick & Wimmer, 2006:153). Content analysis does not define or prescribe the categories or characteristics of what to analyse, and how to interpret the findings of this analysis, which is done by the dominant theoretical framework underpinning the study. A common pitfall is to count too many characteristics because they can be counted, instead of focusing on those which are directly related to the research question (Cottle et al, 1998:123). This study narrowed the characteristics to three themes: positive responses to the decision to close comments; negative responses to the decision; and off-topic or irrelevant responses (largely comments directed towards other commenters).

Meanwhile, content analysis is also moving closer to textual analysis in order to explore and analyse a wider range of content, by examining the underlying shared experiences and the consequences of these. Anderson (2012:73) defines textual analysis as the “critical-cultural correspondent to content analysis”. Traditionally, content analysis involved counting “nonproblematic textual entities” such as the number of times a certain entity would appear. But content analysis is now heading towards a merger with textual analysis techniques as it starts to “search out character, motive, action and themes”. Textual analysis brings in elements such as “interpellation, implication, referentiality and intertextuality” (Anderson, 2012:73).

According to Dominick and Wimmer (2006:171) the Internet provides a large number of content options that can be studied, from web pages to social media to comments and e-mails. It can be easily accessed using search engines or other online tools, and can be cost-effective as it can be searched from anywhere and does not require hard paper copies. However, sampling can be problematic given the wide range of options and the fact that few sample frames exist. Narrowing down the unit of analysis can also prove challenging, and can possibly introduce bias.

It is also difficult to keep up to date, as the Internet constantly evolves, with new sites or comments added on a regular basis, which could affect the reliability of the study. In this study, the volume of stories with comments was too wide, so it was decided to focus on the fewer stories and columns with comments relating to the research question.

In this study, content analysis was conducted on comments posted to six online articles relating to *News24*'s decision selected because they had comments. These were *Fin24*, *EWN*, *iafrica.com*, *MyBroadband*, *Bizcommunity*, and a column by *News24* editor-in-chief Andrew Trench published on September 8, 2015, announcing the decision. This column received a total of 1180 comments and the other articles together received 506 comments. Comments were categorised into three themes: critical of the decision, in agreement with the decision, or not relevant. The *News24* Facebook post of the original announcement received 308 comments and 524 likes, reaching 323 171 people. Content analysis of the 308 comments was abandoned when it became apparent that many of those posting comments on the Facebook post misunderstood and thought that *News24* was closing comments on its Facebook page, and not on the *News24* website itself. This skewed the analysis as it was not clear which platform they were referring to.

4.8 Summary

This chapter has examined the predominant research methodologies used in this case study, namely interviews, a survey and content analysis, and explained the reasons for their selection and use.

The benefits of each methodology were stated, such as being able to conduct the research in a flexible, natural setting, where the subjects were familiar with the topic of inquiry, meaning they could provide more information than expected by the researcher. There were also potential drawbacks, such as the relatively small sample size, constrained by the size of the editorial staff which actually dealt directly with comments. Other disadvantages to the research methodologies such as researcher bias, time, response rates and time, were raised and explained.

The next chapter will consider the findings from the interviews, survey and content analysis, and discuss the impact of this and whether it answers the research question.

Chapter 5: Findings and discussion

5.1 Overview

Chapter 4 outlined the research methodologies used in this study and how they were selected and the research was carried out. This chapter examines the findings from the semi-structured interviews, the survey (Questions in Addendum 1, page 118), and the content analysis of 1686 comments, relating to *News24*'s decision to close comments.

The research reveals that there are differences in perceptions between *News24* staff and with users about the decision to close comments, and whether it was the best interests of *News24* itself, or in the best interests of furthering engagement and debate on the platform. *News24* management were primarily concerned about reputational damage and legal risks, as well as the increased staffing capacity required to adequately moderate comments. Users, meanwhile, took to the comments section to express their disappointment at the decision, citing concerns about the curtailment of free speech and the inability to interact with other South Africans online.

5.2 Interview responses

5.2.1 Examining the decision to close comments

The management interviewees were largely in agreement that closing comments was the right decision for *News24* at the time. Lakay stated it was best for *News24* as a brand, arguing that keeping comments open would have been a reputational risk. Basson summed it up as such:

News24 had unfortunately developed a very bad reputation due to comments, it was starting to dominate the discourse about what *News24* is about, people didn't refer to the content anymore, but to the comments, and the trolls were dominating the comments unfortunately. So I am very glad that *News24* made the decision.

Reece, meanwhile, stated that the "spirit of the decision was right", but how it was implemented needed a more nuanced examination, as the "out of sight, out of mind" approach to comments has not been beneficial, resulting in a loss of user engagement.

I think it was more a case of like the business wasn't prepared to invest in it in the way it needed to be done, because they were looking at it from a network wide, all-or-nothing approach.

Reece argued that more thought should have been given to alternative ways to handle comments and maintain engagement. Basson agreed that engagement and interaction is an important component of digital journalism, and that unlike print journalism, “readers talk back to you, and we have to think creatively about how to make that happen”.

5.2.2 The reasons for closing comments

The chief reason for closing comments appears to have been reputational and legal risks. According to Emeran, there were concerns that *News24* could be sued over comments on the site because “whatever lives on your platform, you are responsible for”. Lakay stated that *News24* was becoming a “destination for people who wanted entertainment value from the comments” and were not serious about contributing to public discourse:

A large percentage of comment submissions were abusive, or downright racist – while we moderated as best we could, the odd bad comment would still slip through, and that could have proved a huge problem for us.

Reece was however more critical of the managerial decisions behind the move, describing it as a “terrible knee-jerk reaction” due to fears of legal action and reputational damage over hate speech. The fact that former General Manager Cohen was due to depart meant he was “more receptive to trying something new” and gave his blessing, according to Reece.

I don't think the intentions were incorrect, but I think if you think about the headspace of the people making the decision at the time, they had very much focused on other things... I think it was a fairly binary decision about ‘it would be bad if we are sued therefore we should not do it’, not ‘it would be bad if we were sued therefore we should look at doing this better so that we aren't

sued’... I think that’s typical corporate mentality which I don’t think needed to have taken place.

This argument can be analysed in terms of the political economy approach, and the impact that media management has on not only the product, but its ability to serve as a forum for public debate. *News24* management appeared to be concerned primarily with reputational damage and threats of legal action and the risk these would bring to the business, rather than increasing audience numbers and engagement, which would result in greater profit.

Reece was also critical of the fact that management had not implemented actionable steps about selectively opening comments on certain articles, as was stated by Trench (2015:1) in his original column, meaning that this rarely happened. The resources that had been spent on moderating comments were “dissolved and diluted by run of the mill subbing” and not spent on actively creating new avenues for engagement or trying out new editorial direction.

There were also commercial implications. Reece pointed out despite significant space for advertising lower down on an average *News24* page, most advertisers did not want their brands featured near the comments section. *News24* could have looked at monetising time spent on page, but if users were spending most of that at the bottom of the page reading comments, where there was no advertising, it would not have delivered significant advertising returns. Reece observed:

The fact that we’ve never made money off user-generated content in general and comments in particular speaks volumes. So the idea that we have advertisers who don’t want to have their brand associated with bad news let alone bad opinion, kind of settles the deal for me.

Personal reasons could also have played a role in the decision. Reece suggested that there could have been “a bit of ego involved there as well”, as members of the management team and staff of *News24* did not enjoy “being the butt of everybody’s jokes” and “sitting around a dinner table having to defend comments on *News24*”.

5.2.3 Reputational damage

There was a general view that *News24* had become primarily associated with its comments section, and not with news, according to the interviewees. “We wanted to be known as a top news site, not for fostering an environment for abuse and racism,” stated Lakay. The decision to close comments has thus seen a moderate improvement in reputation: “It’s not the first thing people say to you anymore: ‘oh your comments are so bad’,” noted Emeran. Reece believed the decision “has improved our overall tone and reputation”, while Lakay believed that *News24* is “almost back to being known for breaking news”. Basson stated that both *News24*’s reputation and the level of debate in the opinion pieces where comments are open have improved.

The ultimate effect of closing comments on *News24* was “negligible”, according to Lakay. However, user engagement, especially in the *MyNews24* UGC section, did suffer, as “*MyNews24* excelled based on the interaction via comments on stories, within that community”. Taking comments away meant the sense of community lessened and submissions took a knock, Lakay explained. Emeran noted that time on page and engagement with content did drop initially, but selectively opening comments on stories more regularly would address this.

5.2.4 International trends

According to Reece, the timing of *News24*’s decision was especially relevant, as it came at a time when many other sites were closing comments, as evidenced by the World Editors Forum report (Huang, 2016:4). Two years earlier, the decision would have been harder to make as this was not a trend. The fact that closing comments had not negatively affected these sites, and had even been good for their brands, certainly influenced the decision, argued Emeran.

Lakay stated that international trends were a major consideration, but staff constraints were also a deciding factor, as *News24* did not have specific moderators and this function was left to staff members on top of their other daily commitments. Basson agreed, stating that moderators would be needed if comments were to be opened again, and *News24*, as well as most media organisations in South Africa, would be unable to afford that.

5.2.5 The ideal situation for comments

Asked about the best situation for comments on *News24*, the interviewees agreed that more control and more moderation would work best. “The ideal situation is to have the utmost control – if that requires only opening comments on certain articles, then yes. I think comments should also only be opened for limited time periods,” stated Lakay. Basson believed *News24* needs to interact with its users more, both on social media and encouraging them to submit short pieces, but “I don’t think we’ve cracked a new model yet”.

There were concerns about using Facebook logins, as there are still a large number of fake accounts, and other filters and mechanisms to block suspicious accounts or unsavoury words do not always work because “somehow these trolls still find a way through every filter”, according to Emeran. A human moderator is always going to be needed, especially when users get creative and spell swear words slightly differently in order to evade filters.

Reece stated that the “status quo” for *News24* is probably the best for the moment, where comments are opened on selected opinion pieces, for a limited period, and are pre-moderated. But comments have always been treated as the “lowest common denominator” on *News24*, argued Reece, and an ideal situation would be to reconsider the notion of UGC and feedback to enable users to perhaps give feedback in a different way in an article. This would require strategic development but could be in the best long term interests of *News24*.

Basson stated that the guiding principle is that *News24* needs to be open to interaction with its users, and find creative ways to do this. “South Africans love debate, they like talking, if we are not going to be that platform they are going to find it somewhere else.” He added:

It’s ultimately creating a platform where readers feel they’ve got a voice, but also always knowing that as media, you have the role of editing and curating, otherwise it’s just a blog really where anything goes. We have certain standards, certain qualities that we want to maintain as a brand.

Lakay believed it is possible that *News24* may open comments again, “after taking lots of different variables into consideration”, but the situation needed to be ideal for *News24*. Emeran argued that when comments were open on every article, there weren’t always significant comments on these, so it would not be productive to open comments on every article unless it’s “something you know where there’s positive debate”. *News24* would need to carefully consider all available options and “play it carefully” if it decided to open default comments again.

5.2.6 Comments on *News24*’s Facebook page

According to Lakay, there was a “slight uptick” in comments posted on *News24*’s Facebook page, but there were already conversations and comments on this page before *News24*’s decision to close comments, so it was not significant. Emeran felt that Facebook comments increased slightly because that is where users can discuss stories, but the Facebook page was not always a primary destination to comment on stories. Many of the trolls who commented on *News24* have not commented on its Facebook page, possibly because it was easier to have a discussion on the *News24* platform. The ones that did comment on Facebook were banned by the page administrators.

As the social media editor, Emeran was conflicted about whether engagement would be better on *News24* pages or on Facebook. The important thing, Emeran added, is that increased engagement on *News24*’s Facebook page, and sharing posts, is positive for *News24*. “I would actually like people to comment on Facebook, so that it appears on their friends’ news feeds, it’s a good thing for us if people are engaging on Facebook, but positively engaging.”

According to Reece, management attention was largely focused on comments on *News24* pages, and not on the “absolute drivel” that was posted on its Facebook page, mostly because there was a belief that “that’s Facebook’s problem, not ours”. There were however concerns about how to control comments on *News24*’s Facebook page. “We moderated as much as we could, but because Facebook is not our platform, this proved trying,” stated Lakay. Emeran expressed similar frustration, saying *News24* cannot close comments on posts or moderate effectively. Regardless, Emeran felt *News24* should closely monitor the Facebook comments, especially on contentious stories, but this is hampered by staff constraints. As Emeran pointed

out, problematic comments will not be associated with Facebook, but with *News24* because “it’s our branding on that page”.

5.2.7 Comments on opinion pieces

Basson stated that the worst comments were generally found on news stories, while analysis and opinion pieces generally received better quality comments. Lakay agreed, saying there was an improvement in the quality of comments on opinion pieces. “I’d say 80% upwards of comments submitted could actually be published, which was amazing.” Comments are therefore worth having on opinion pieces, Lakay said. “We definitely want to foster constructive debate.”

Basson agreed that the quality of debate had improved and “you see people bringing interesting arguments and not dragging into this mud pool of insults”. He believed they are “almost scared to misuse the platform” now that they know comments are pre-moderated and they may lose the opportunity to comment if the comments are not to standard.

However, there are concerns that the process of moderating opinion pieces can cause gate-keeping and bias on the part of the moderator, with only certain comments deemed by the moderator not to be problematic being approved, while some that are rejected could still add constructively to the debate.

5.2.8 Public debate

One of the research questions informing this study was the effect that closing comments had on the state of public discourse in South Africa, and whether the notion of the ideal public sphere had been hampered by this move. Lakay argued that it had not, as “the discourse on *News24* had become much less debate, and much more vitriol” and shutting comments did not negatively affect debate. Lakay added that given South Africa’s divided history and its inequality, users “refuse to understand the concept of public debate”, and would make racist and offensive statements online that they would never make on the street or to people they knew. This is an example of deindividuation, discussed in Chapter 2.

Basson also argued that comments ended up not being a debate, but degenerated into a “festival of insults and bigotry”, comparing some comments to a brawl which takes place in bars but should not take place on a news website. He observed:

I don't think we stifled debate. I think we stifled debate by having comments, because people who had something really interesting to say, who wanted to make a contribution, got scared and afraid to be attacked, and so they moved off the platform.

Emeran believed that having comments open on every article was not conducive to true public debate as not all stories received the same amount of comments, and did not promote debate. It was also a diluted form of debate, spread across many articles, where users would have to actively seek out comments threads. However, certain stories are suited to discussion and debate, and these should be promoted as providing an opportunity to comment, Emeran said. There are also human interest stories where comments should be opened to enable users to engage and offer support, and where “good Samaritans come out of the woodwork, where there's a chance for something good to happen, or a follow up story”. Such stories would assist *News24* in playing a normative role in the South African media landscape.

Reece observed that the majority of *News24* users now use mobile devices instead of computers, and this affects the quality of comments. “The whole notion of posting a comment to an article is very desktop dependent, it skews itself to a certain type of our audience, and mobile commenters get drowned out.” Typing comments on a relatively small screen also “does not lend itself to very long, thought-out comments”. Many users, especially on mobile devices, are also not as literate or are writing in their second language, Reece pointed out. While there may be an editorial temptation to moderate badly spelt comments, “I felt that actually keeping those comments on was better representative of our audience” and helped in fostering debate, Reece stated. Emeran observed that comments and emails from the *News24* mobile site are “so nice” compared to the main website, possibly because users have a positive relationship with their mobile device and are choosing to use it, rather than “sitting at your desk, annoyed at work so you want to vent somewhere”.

Altering the comments for mobile platforms, to enable shorter comments, or vote based answers to poll sentiment, would “tie in nicely with South Africa’s idea of democracy – you have a voice” but it would also be easier to control so it does not degenerate into uncivil comments. This would also assist in driving up engagement and would ideally mean that less moderation would be required as the comments would be less likely to get out of hand, according to Reece.

Basson argued that while he does not believe *News24* has an obligation to provide a space for an online public sphere, digital media cannot continue with the top-down approach of print media, and from an editorial and commercial perspective “we would shoot ourselves in the foot if we don’t create a platform” for engagement. He stated:

The world is increasingly interactive, people want to talk back, people like to interact. And we need to make sure that from a user experience perspective, it’s easy for them to do that, but in a constructive way.

5.3 Survey of *News24* staff

Half of the 16 survey respondents who were involved in moderation and discussions about comments believed they are a positive addition to an online news publication, while a quarter disagreed, and a quarter was unsure. All agreed that comments generate healthy debate, broaden viewpoints, and also increase readership and engagement. Comments can add value and extra information to a story too, resulting in potential follow-ups, so can be good for journalism.

However, there was consensus that too many comments were abusive and “degenerate into mud-slinging and racist slurs”, resulting in the conversations not being constructive or civil. The *News24* comments became “a platform for hate speech in South Africa, something we can ill afford as a nation divided by among others racial, sexual and religious lines”, stated one respondent. There were too many commenters who “seem to be more interested in tearing down others than healthy conversation”. The negatives outweighed the positives in many cases, according to one respondent, and could also harm the *News24* brand.

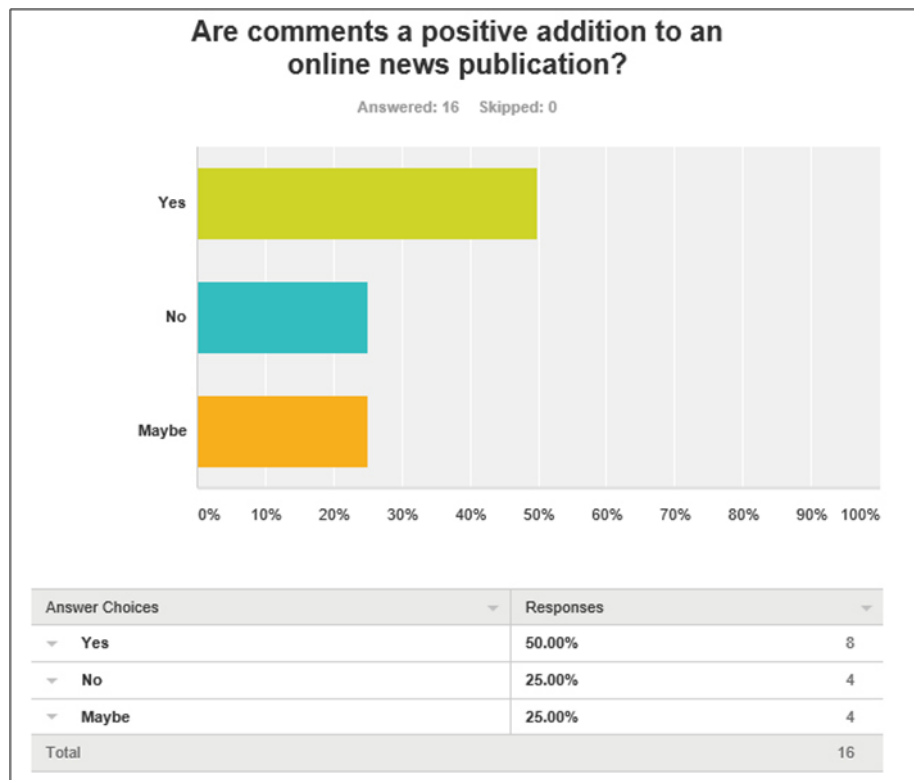


Figure 1 (SurveyMonkey)

There were also observations that comments can be difficult to moderate, and too stressful for one person to moderate. One respondent cited how difficult it was not to become “over-zealous” while moderating comments, and also to remain impartial at all times. Effective moderation “delays the conversation” meaning that it’s not as immediate and interactive, but is seen as a “necessary evil”.

5.3.1 The decision to close comments

Of the respondents, 85% agreed with the decision to close comments, stating that they were “just too much to handle” and it was harming the brand. “Comments were becoming a forum for the same groups of people to parade narrow and often racist views, moderating comments was onerous and time-consuming, and very often they did not add any value to the stories,” was one response. Another stated that “comments polarised society and added no value in national discourse”, counteracting the idea that comments could be seen as an ideal public sphere.

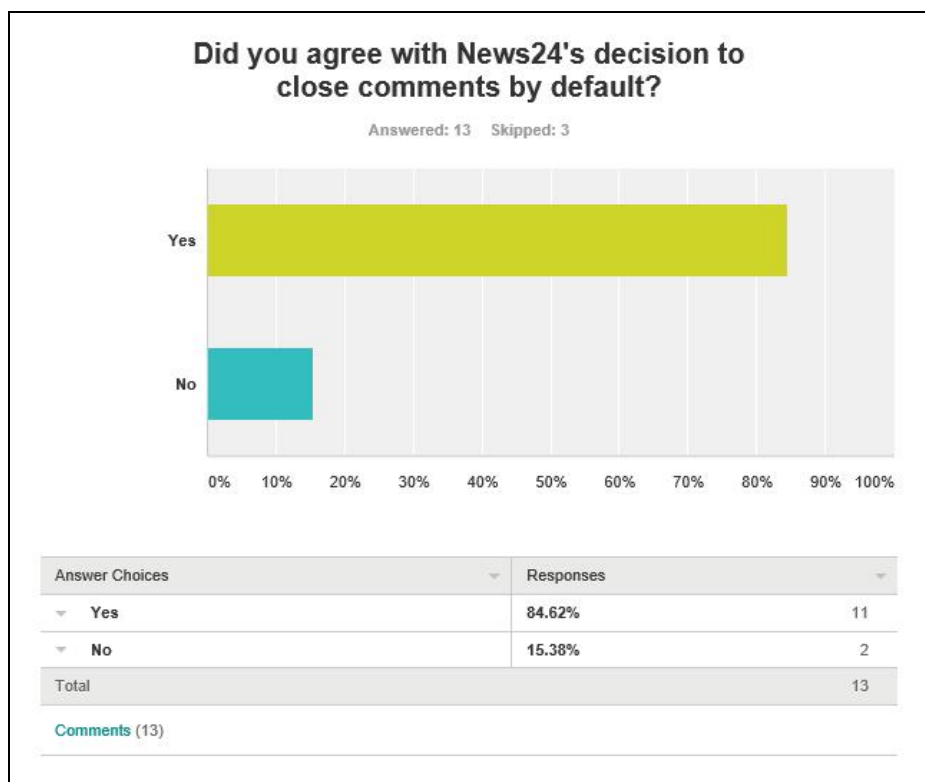


Figure 2 (SurveyMonkey)

Despite the overwhelming support for the decision, there was some criticism: “I think the decision was knee-jerk in light of potential legal liability of commenters. If the organisation had an effective moderation policy in place, a large percentage of the damaging comments could have been avoided,” stated one respondent. Another suggested it was a case of “out of mind, out of sight” while one stated that a clear comments policy and moderators would have helped.

Meanwhile, 61% of respondents said they did not miss comments on *News24*. Some stated that comments added value, others said they did not. “I’m a bit torn because sometimes open comments led to positive outcomes for people in need but then at other times people were really abusive and ignorant,” was one response. Another observed that “*News24* is a news service, not an agony column”.

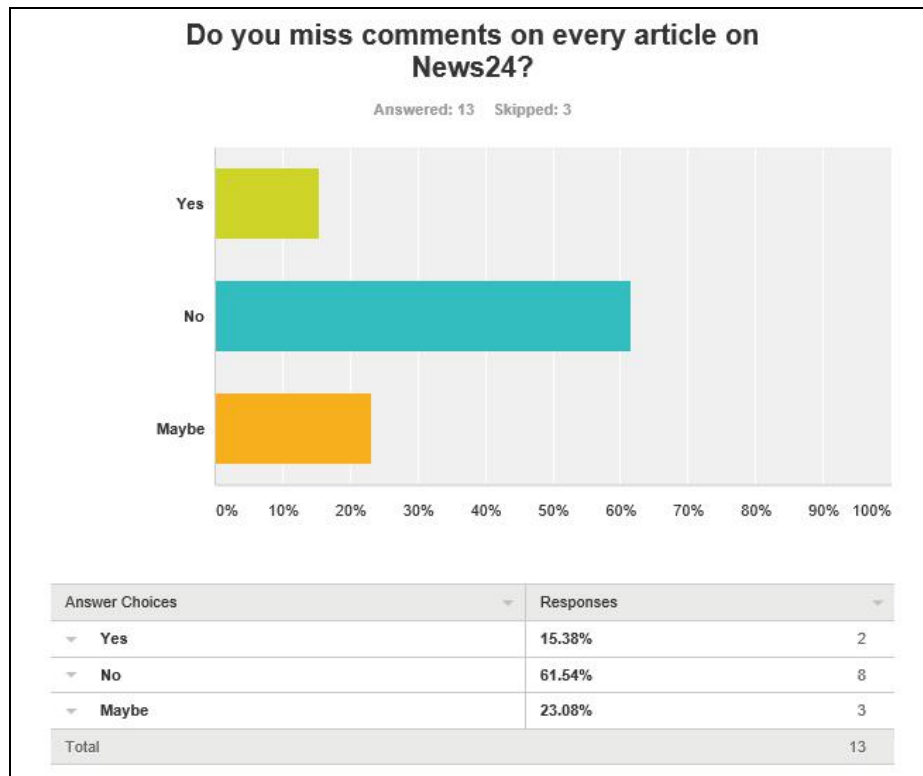


Figure 3 (SurveyMonkey)

This is in contrast to an informal poll on the *News24* voting booth on September 12, 2016 (a year after comments were closed), in which 32 146 *News24* users participated. Of those, 62% missed comments, 31% did not, and 6% were not sure.



Figure 4 (*News24* voting booth)

5.3.2 Reputational damage

While there was agreement that *News24*'s perceived reputation was negatively impacted by the quality of comments, nearly half of survey respondents did not believe *News24* had suffered as a result of closing comments. Despite an initial drop in website traffic, the consensus was that readership had levelled out and users are still engaging with the site on social media. "It's about prioritising quality content over clicks," said one respondent. Some cited the loss of engagement and potentially useful feedback and extra information on stories. "In some ways it has benefitted *News24*, in some ways it has robbed *News24* of audience voices," was one response highlighting the ambivalence on this question.

5.3.3 The ideal situation for comments

Respondents were in agreement that the ideal situation for online comments would be better technology with improved filters, a clear comments policy, and full-time moderators. Another respondent raised the idea of monetising the comments, in order to justify the expense of the moderators. This was one response:

In my opinion, the media has a role to play in generating constructive debate with multiple views. I therefore think that there should be a layered process of full time pre-moderation of all comments, including better technology to make this job seamless for all the moderators.

Another, however, was more circumspect: "I don't think there's an ideal situation."

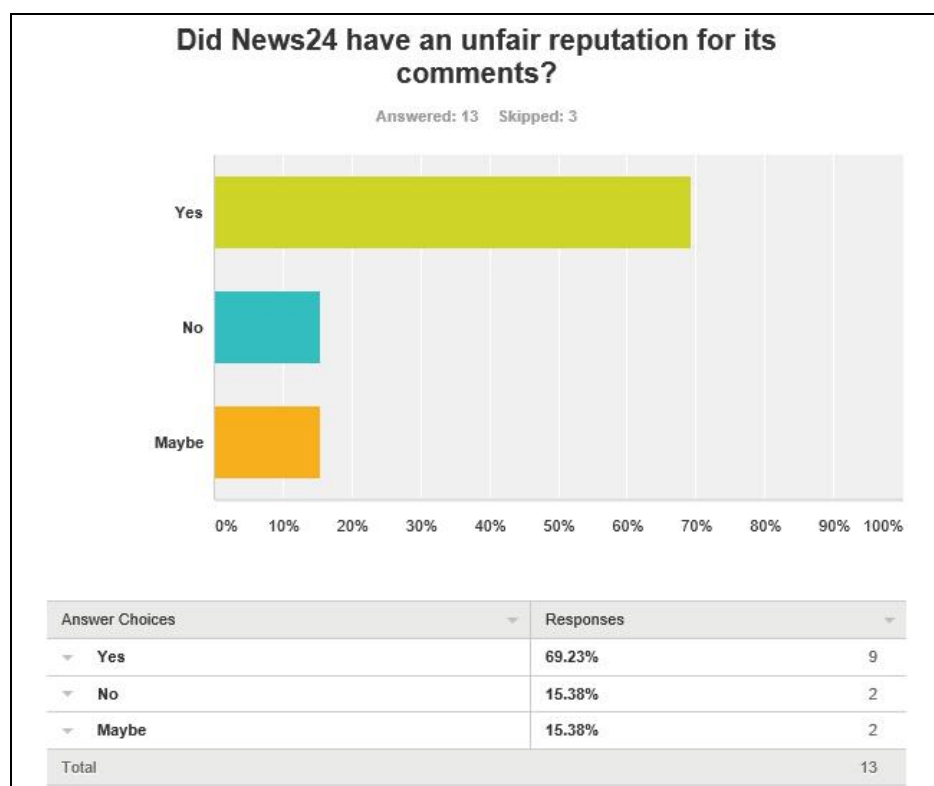


Figure 5 (SurveyMonkey)

5.3.4 Comments on *News24*'s Facebook page

Most respondents found that there was an increase in comments on *News24*'s Facebook page, but not a significant one. Some found there was an increase in how users engaged with each other and the story, as “people often need to express how they feel about an article somewhere, so they visit the *News24* Facebook page to air their views”, while others found that the comments were nonetheless abusive. Some respondents also admitted to not checking comments on the Facebook page as it is not their responsibility anymore.

5.3.5 Public debate

Significantly, 77% of respondents do not believe that closing comments has affected public debate and the standards of journalism in South Africa. Only 15% felt it had. Respondents argued that the Internet, especially social media, allowed free and open debate on many platforms, and that online comments are often not about constructive debate, but rather about “vitriolic attacks” on people. A respondent believed that many of the comments on *News24* were

in fact restricting debate, not encouraging it. Closing comments also forces sites to find alternative ways to engage with users, which can result in improved debate, one felt.

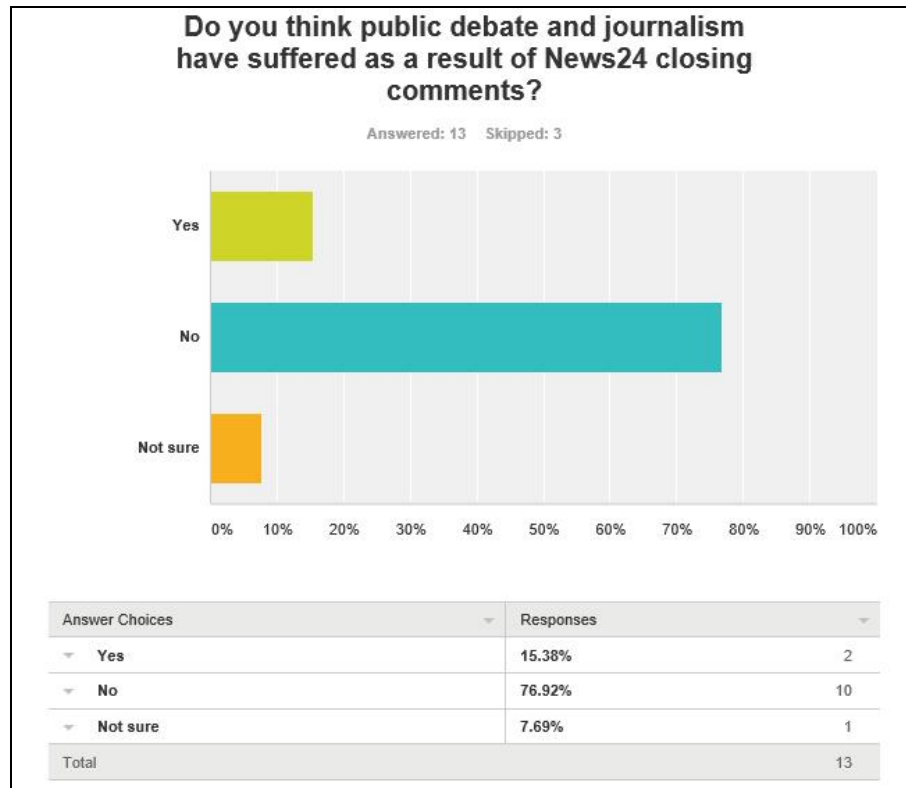


Figure 6 (SurveyMonkey)

Another respondent believed that many who commented “contributed very little to real debate – they were often uneducated and unenlightened”, while another response stated that “journalists still hold the responsibility to deconstruct and record the country’s stories, not the public”. This somewhat undermines the idea that the Internet allowed free and open debate for all users to discuss current events and form opinions.

5.4 Content analysis

The column by Trench (2015:1) received a total of 1180 comments. Of these, 50% were broadly critical of *News24* and the decision to close comments, mostly citing the loss of the ability to interact with other users, and the loss of free speech on the platform. A further 27% expressed support for the decision, while 23% of the comments received were deemed off topic

and not related, for instance banter between commenters and raising other issues. A story posted on Fin24's Tech section later that day received 284 comments, half of which were critical of the decision, but only 13% supporting the move. Meanwhile, the content analysis also revealed that 167 of the commenters (10%) expressed concerns about censorship or political interference stifling debate. A further 83 (5%) voiced displeasure at the standards of journalism on *News24*. The results can be seen in the table below:

Content analysis results

Website	Negative	Positive	Not relevant	Total
<i>News24</i>	588 (50%)	314 (27%)	278 (23%)	1180
<i>Fin24</i>	141 (50%)	37 (13%)	106 (37%)	284
<i>EWN</i>	4 (36%)	1 (9%)	6 (55%)	11
<i>iafrica.com</i>	11 (61%)	3 (17%)	4 (22%)	18
<i>MyBroadband</i>	44 (24%)	42 (23%)	99 (53%)	186
<i>Bizcommunity</i>	1 (12%)	5 (63%)	2 (25%)	8
Total	685 (41%)	506 (30%)	495 (29%)	1686

(Table 1. Results of content analysis)

A sample of the most pertinent comments and arguments was selected. Those critical of the decision voiced concern about censorship and gate-keeping and that allowing comments only on selected columns and stories will present a “sanitised” version of what *News24* believes to be acceptable views. Commenter Derek Marsden took a more political economy argument, stating that the decision was “a strategy of global mainstream media. Only the opinions of our corporate overlords are to be heard as our opinions are shaped to suit their ends”. A comment from user Sharon Gilbert-Rivett, can also be analysed in terms of this approach:

What *News24* is really saying is that it isn't prepared to invest in control methods to curb wayward commentators or weed out hate

speech, trolls and the other challenges to providing people with voices a platform on which to use them. In spite of being part of such as huge media machine, *News24* is not prepared to spend any of its profits to actually improve the interactivity between it and its readers.

This speaks to the concerns that this decision was based purely on corporate reasons. These fears were echoed by Conrad Oliver, who stated that *News24* had now “absolved yourself from the grit and effort” to moderate comments, and the decision to only selectively open comments was “part of a growing tendency – where the perceived ‘higher ups’ want to control our thoughts and words and emotions”. User James Groenewald compared closing comments to the prohibition on the USA or the Immorality Act during apartheid, stating “you believe yourself incapable of transforming through leadership, so moralise through decree”.

Many of the commenters expressed regret at the loss of the potential public sphere role that the comments section had. User Wade Latham argued that losing the opportunity “for small voices to be heard and listened to by all” was very serious, and that as South Africa’s biggest news website, *News24* was the “best opportunity for the public to communicate directly with everyone”. Another commenter, Whoami Idonno, stated that the “open and sometimes antagonistic discourse” enabled ordinary people to express the “true thoughts and feelings they rarely or never got to express on any public platform”, echoing Mouffe’s model of agonistic pluralism (Mouffe, 1999:758). User Notchimine Mette observed that no matter how derisive, comments were “a look into the mindset of all South Africans” while Fred Tucek argued that “the comments on *News24* accurately portray the current social and political attitudes in South Africa” and Warren David Hale stated that the comments section “is the best barometer of South African society’s health that I have found”.

Meanwhile, those who supported the move to close comments were largely in agreement about the uncivil comments and off-topic arguments. Commenter Yakobi Funaihagu stated that *News24* comments demonstrated that “racism and prejudice is alive and well in South Africa”, adding that while it was clear that many of them came from “a minority of people who cannot claim that they represent the majority of South Africans”, it would be a relief not to have to read

the comments. Japie Moolman stated that the comments were in the public domain, yet “many comments were derogatory and insulting. That is not freedom of speech. That is bad manners”. Another user, Ruan Bezuidenhout argued that “this is the news, not your personal vendetta release space”, while William Ric-Hansen posted:

The comment section is not a free zone to air all your prejudices, stupidity and hate. The *News24* comment section has always been a bigoted and hateful place that drives South Africans apart instead of together. Good riddance.

This can be analysed in terms of the debate between free speech and hate speech, and the idea of the media being a public sphere, where there is open deliberation which can be seen to have a normative function. As another commenter, Bongani Sibusiso Shange, observed, “most of the comments in this platform were destroying our nation and the spirit of patriotism”.

5.5 Discussion

The research revealed that while comments are seen as a positive addition to an online news publication, there was broad agreement from *News24* management and staff with the decision to close comments, given the timing and circumstances. However, the quantitative content analysis showed that the majority of commenters (41%) were critical of the decision, especially the perception that political or commercial forces were behind this curtailment of free speech and the loss of the ability to interact. The latter can also be analysed in terms of uses and gratifications theory, where these users sought out particular needs through the process of posting or reading comments, and were now reacting to having this sense of gratification curtailed.

Concerns were raised by *News24* staff about the loss of engagement, and that it was a “knee jerk” decision which was not entirely thought through, with no actionable alternatives in place. This shows that despite agreement on the decision to close comments, there is ambivalence and criticism of the way it was made and the implementation of the move, and selectively opening comments appears to have been forgotten. While many opinion pieces are open for comment, decisions on what articles to open for comment are largely at the discretion of

the duty editor, potentially introducing bias and gate-keeping, and there are no clear targets on how many stories to open for comment, meaning that very few are, unlike what Trench (2015:1) stated.

Meanwhile, a majority (62%) of the surveyed staff do not miss comments, while roughly the same percentage of users voted that they do miss comments. It can be argued that the staff were answering from the perspective of having had to moderate comments, while the users are missing the ability to interact with others, from a uses and gratifications perspective.

Concerns about legal action, the cost of employing more moderators or investing in better technology were largely commercial decisions. These can be analysed in terms of the critical political economy model to have been prudent in terms of avoiding risk and extra financial outlay, but having a largely negative effect on engagement and increasing audience numbers, and thereby profit.

On the way forward for comments, there was consensus that it would only work if there was full time or increased moderation, improved technology, a clear comments policy, and only opening select stories for comment. This reflects the evolving best practices in the World Editors Forum 2016 report (Huang, 2016:13) on comments, where a number of organisations are experimenting with selective commenting.

There was agreement that *News24* can play a normative function by hosting constructive and positive debate, but there was uncertainty whether this is an obligation, in terms of the public sphere model, and whether having comments in the past had indeed provided this space for an ideal public sphere, given the arguments that *News24* had curtailed debate due to the toxic comments that appeared. It would appear that gate-keeping on the part of the moderators, to assess whether comments fall within the accepted guidelines of free speech but not amounting to hate speech, could be beneficial in that it would allow some form of debate, even if not entirely unconstrained. Having comments open on all articles would also not necessarily provide the ideal and accessible forum for public debate, as it would be broken up in every article published on the site, instead of a select few, which would be seen by more people.

One of the ways to assess whether closing comments negatively affected *News24* is to look at its audience statistics. Effective Measure, which measures online audiences, showed that over the period 11 September 2015 to 11 September 2016, *News24*'s unique browsers increased 9.58% and page views increased 11.81%, suggesting that its audience had steadily increased over the period. (See figure below. The large spike is over the 2016 municipal elections).

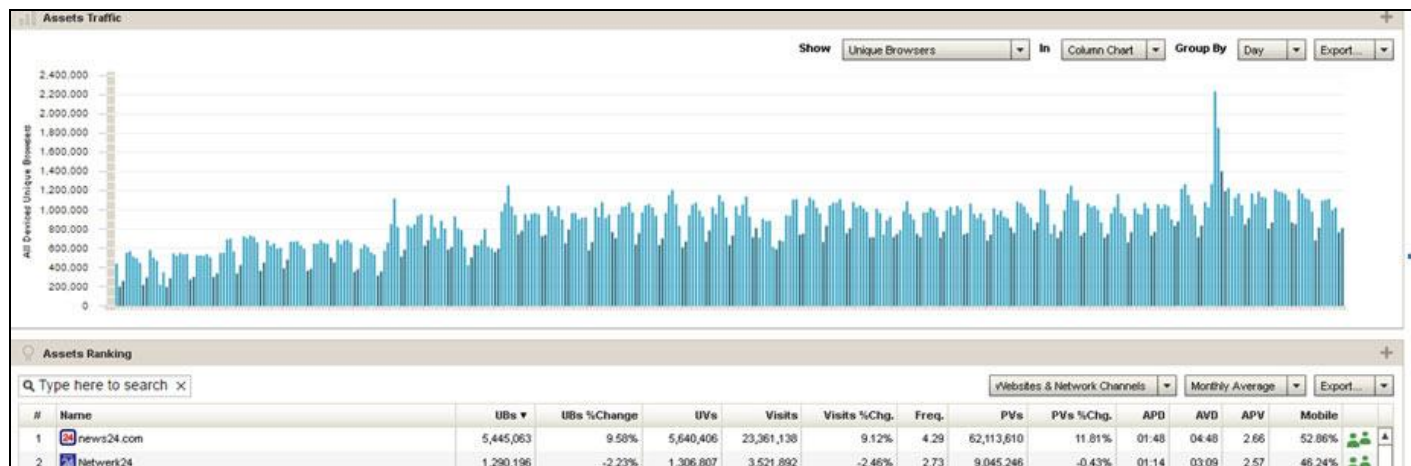


Figure 7 (Effective Measure)

5.6 Summary

The main findings from the interviews, survey and content analysis have been examined and discussed, in order to demonstrate the different thought processes and reactions to *News24*'s decision to close comments. While *News24* management and staff overwhelmingly believed this was the right decision for the publication, given concerns about legal and reputational threats, there was still criticism about the way the decision was made and implemented. Meanwhile, users were largely critical of the decision, losing their ability to comment on the platform.

The next chapter will continue with this discussion as it summarises the findings of the research problem and research questions.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

6.1 Overview

In September 2015, *News24* followed the example of a number of international news organisations when it decided to close comments by default. This case study examined the implications of this decision a year later, considering whether it could be seen to have positively or negatively affected *News24* and whether public discourse and the notion of online comments forming an ideal public sphere may have been undermined by closing comments. The nature of abusive comments, and the motivation of trolls and other users to post such comments was discussed, along with the ideal situation for comments, and whether *News24* explored these in depth before making the decision. The move to steer commenting and engagement to social media, particularly Facebook, could be seen to absolve *News24* of the responsibility of moderating comments, but also resulted in a loss of engagement.

These are some of the key themes that were examined in this study. A summary of the chapters in which they were discussed follows.

6.2 Chapter summaries

6.2.1 Introduction

The introductory chapter detailed the reasons for undertaking the research and a literature review on the current debates about whether online comments add value to a publication or have become a headache for publishers and should be closed down. The research problem, focus and research questions centred on this debate, examining the broader issues of balancing freedom of expression and fostering healthy public dialogue with the proliferation of hate speech in online comments and the legal and reputational risks associated with this, resulting in the decision by many news websites, including *News24*, to close comments.

6.2.2 Literature review

Chapter 2 outlined what is known about the field of online comments, tracing their rise and the benefits and challenges associated with them. The literature review formed the starting point of the research and led to the formation of the research questions and general departure

points. The general research question was: How did the decision by *News24* to close down its comments facility impact this particular media outlet, as well as perceptions about the state of journalism and public discourse in South Africa?

The specific research questions were:

1. Did staff members and users of *News24* agree with the management decision to close comments?
2. What were the key reasons for closing comments at *News24*?
3. How was *News24* affected by the decision to close the comments?
4. How did the closing of comments affect perceptions of online news media, and specifically *News24*, as an ideal public sphere?
5. Is outsourcing comments to social media, especially Facebook, regarded as the best approach for *News24*?
6. What is the ideal situation for hosting online comments, according to *News24* staff and management?

Issues such as user interaction, identity formation online, the effect of anonymity in comments forums, and how deindividuation results in uncivil behaviour in such forums, were examined in order to understand the problems publishers faced with hosting comments, and what led to the need for moderation and ultimately closing them down.

6.2.3 Theoretical framework

This chapter detailed the theoretical framework informing this research. It focused on the normative approach, examining how comments can assist the media in advancing democracy through facilitating public debate, and how comments can demonstrate some elements of an ideal public sphere. But this notion of the public sphere can be problematic, because it can be seen as elitist, with limited access to it, and due to the incivility in comments which may deter debate. Its focus on rational debate also excludes the role of conflict in fostering democratic discourse. The chapter also used the critical political economy approach to consider how corporate dynamics such as risk reduction and reputation management had an impact in the decision to close

comments. The motivations of online commenters who seek to satisfy needs such as entertainment or diversion were explained through uses and gratifications theory, while the moderation of comments was analysed as a form of gate-keeping, where content is selected and processed according to set criteria.

6.2.4 Methodology

This study used both qualitative and quantitative approaches to gather data. The ways in which the research was conducted, including the selection of the methodologies and the preference for qualitative techniques such as interviews and a questionnaire, as well as the shortfalls and challenges associated with each approach, were examined. Interviews have the benefit of providing in-depth customised information but can also be time consuming and lead to bias, while surveys can be simple to conduct and analyse, but can miss out on valuable input through badly worded questions and poor response rates. Content analysis can be timely and the content for analysis may be difficult to select.

6.2.5 Findings

The findings were discussed in this chapter, detailing the climate in which *News24* found itself and the reasoning for the decision to close comments, which was seen to have been informed by a combination of legal, reputational and organisational concerns. The semi-structured interviews with management displayed more ambivalence about the long term effect on the publication and on user engagement, despite agreement that closing comments was the best decision at the time. This agreement was seen in the survey with staff, with overwhelming support for the move. Quantitative content analysis of 1686 user comments, however, was more critical of the move, with 685, or 41%, expressing a negative opinion about it.

6.3 Examining the research problem

6.3.1 Was *News24*'s decision to close down its comments facility the most appropriate course of action, given the circumstances and current online environment?

The decision to close comments by default appears to have been the most practical and prudent decision for *News24* to take, given the technological and staffing constraints, and the

current international trends regarding online comments. *News24* staff members were in agreement that this was the best course of action to take, despite concerns about the way it was taken and the many positive attributes that comments can bring to the site. The fact that *News24*'s traffic grew in the region of 10% over the following year also demonstrates that it was not adversely affected.

6.3.2 Were the perceived reputational and legal risks for *News24* purely commercial and did this result in a loss of user engagement?

News24 closed comments due to both concerns about facing legal action for the types of comments hosted on its platform, and the reputational damage this was having on not only the site, but also those who worked for it. It can be argued that the decision was a commercial one, to avoid costly legal action and protect the reputation of the brand. Other commercial factors, such as the realisation that additional staff would need to be employed in order to moderate comments, played a role. However, these commercial considerations had to be weighed up against the loss of engagement which did occur as a result of closing comments, but this was a conscious sacrifice in order to mitigate the abovementioned risks.

6.3.3 What led to problematic comments, and how could these have been prevented, or better moderated, in an ideal situation?

News24 was not alone as it weighed up how to balance freedom of expression online with comments that bordered on hate speech, with many local and international sites facing similar challenges (Goodman, 2013:5). Cyber psychology research found that Internet users lost their inhibitions online, and were more prone to posting uncivil comments (Suler, (2016:96), especially in situations which could elicit strong emotions, such as the South African political landscape. *News24* tried to prevent such problematic comments by using filters to remove certain key words or phrases, requiring users to log in using their Facebook page and real identity, enabling fellow users to report contentious comments, and closely moderating certain articles and opinion pieces. However, despite all these efforts, the tone of the comments did not significantly improve, and in the absence of the ideal situation of being able to employ more

moderators or find technology to better manage comments, the decision to close comments was considered the most practical solution at the time.

6.3.4 Was the decision fully considered in the light of these questions?

Although there was criticism that the decision was a “knee jerk” one taken at a time of management upheaval and change at *News24*, the issue of how best to approach comments had long been discussed at the organisation, and the benefits and pitfalls of having comments had been weighed up. The fact that the international trend was shifting towards closing comments (Huang, 2016:4), and there were increasing concerns about the legal liability for problematic comments shows that the decision had been carefully considered, and was taken despite the awareness that it would negatively impact on user engagement and constructive online debate.

6.4 Examining the six research questions

6.4.1 Did staff members and users of *News24* agree with the management decision to close comments?

News24 management and staff were unanimous that the approach to close comments was the right one to have taken at the time, citing legal concerns and the damage that comments were doing to the brand. Despite this, staff members were largely in agreement that comments were a positive addition to an online publication although they concurred that comments regularly degenerated into incivility and were difficult to moderate. But concern was raised about the manner in which the decision to close down comments was made, without actionable alternatives to increasing user engagement.

It must be borne in mind that the responses of staff members were influenced by their experiences as gate-keepers while moderating comments or as managers bearing the responsibility of the legal and reputational implications of hosting comments. Users, who were predominantly critical of the decision to close comments, were in the habit of commenting and received gratification from it, thereby having a vested interest in criticising the move. But as research showed that active commenters were only about 1% of total users (Huang, 2016:11), it is not immediately apparent what the views of the wider *News24* audience would be. The content

analysis showed that 30% of users were in support of closing comments and it can be argued that a lot of users who were not in the habit of commenting would share this position.

6.4.2 What were the key reasons for closing comments at *News24*?

News24's main reasons for closing comments appear to have been risk reduction, reputational protection, resource constraints, as well as the fact that it became an international trend. Interviewees and survey respondents explained their concerns relating to having comments which could be construed as hate speech and which could get *News24* sued. The publication had also become known for the heated and acrimonious nature of some of its comments, and was concerned about its reputation, especially in the politically and racially charged atmosphere in current South African discourse, as can be seen from a critical political economy perspective. The fact that *News24* was receiving up to 200 000 comments a month (Huang, 2016:9) meant that operationally, moderating comments was taking up a large amount of resources which could be used elsewhere. And lastly, the resignation of the former general manager and the fact that the editor-in-chief had been in his position for nine months when the decision was made also demonstrates how a change in management led to a shift in perspective and an appetite for fresh approaches to the ongoing challenge of comments.

These reasons can be considered within the critical political economy paradigm to have been largely commercial, putting the priorities of the organisation ahead of firstly increasing engagement in order to grow profit, and secondly the normative functions of a media organisation assuming a role in fostering democracy and debate.

News24's decision to close comments also came at a time when an increasing number of similar publications were making the decision that having a comments section is "simply not worth the effort" (Huang, 2016:4). The fact that many of these publications were also steering their users to Facebook, where the conversation was increasingly taking place, and were feeling the pressures of dwindling newsroom resources and concerns about the legal liability associated with comments, is significant, and appears to have swayed the thinking of *News24* management in the direction of closing comments. It is unlikely that the same decision would have been made

two years earlier, when user engagement was seen to be more important than the downsides associated with having comments.

News24 management was able to look at examples of other publications internationally to inform its decision. It could either have followed the example of *The New York Times* and invested heavily in moderators to improve the quality of its comments section, or followed other publications and closed comments partially or altogether. The fact that these publications had not seen an immediate and discernible detrimental effect may have firmed the resolve of management to close comments.

6.4.3 How was *News24* affected by the decision to close comments?

News24 has steadily grown its traffic in the year since closing comments, with unique browsers up 9.58% and page views up 11.81%, so in basic terms, the decision appears not to have impacted the site too heavily. As Trench observed, due to the fact that only about 1% of users actually posted comments, average time on site went down by about one second when comments were closed (Huang, 2016:11). However, the rise in traffic must also be considered against the backdrop of major news events during that period which would also have increased traffic, including university fees protests, the sacking of Finance Minister Nhlanhla Nene, allegations of state capture; and the 2016 municipal elections, to name a few.

Meanwhile, there was consensus among staff that *News24*'s reputation had improved moderately after closing comments, with the focus returning to its news offering and not being weighed down by criticism over the tone of the comments. User engagement, however, was seen to have decreased, but it would appear that this was a conscious sacrifice in order to restore *News24*'s reputation and address the concerns raised in the previous research question. The views of the staff were contrary to the results of the content analysis, in which the majority of users were critical of *News24*'s decision, many of them expressing that they would no longer visit *News24*. Many of these may merely have been threats in the hope that *News24* would reverse the decision, as user numbers did not significantly decrease.

6.4.4 How did the closing of comments affect perceptions of online news media, and specifically *News24*, as an ideal public sphere?

Closing one of the largest venues for online public debate in South Africa would, it could be assumed, have had a negative impact on the state of public discourse in the country, further reducing the chances of citizens of different backgrounds to come together to debate and discuss issues of the day in an open forum, as Habermas (1989:238) envisaged. Indeed, many of the comments considered for the content analysis expressed this concern. There were also views that shutting off comments will not stop uncivil online behaviour, and that it will merely move elsewhere, less public, thereby escaping detection and censure.

Despite these concerns, it is apparent that many of the comments posted on *News24* and other websites were not advancing public discourse in any way: either they were spam, off topic, or in some way offensive. Unless they were pre-moderated, bringing with it the associated aspects of gate-keeping and bias, comments would often become abusive, unpleasant and the antithesis of a forum for healthy online interaction. Basson made the point that *News24* was in fact hindering, not advancing public debate by allowing comments, and many users with rational, constructive arguments were scared off by the trolls.

Since the decision was made to close comments, there was agreement amongst *News24* staff that the comments received on opinion pieces where comments were open for pre-moderation were of a higher standard with fewer offensive comments, suggesting the trolls were aware they were not likely to get their comments published and had given up or feared being blocked. A large majority of *News24* staff did not believe that public debate had been affected by the decision, with many pointing out that social media platforms allowed debate and this is where much of it had gravitated to in any case.

There was ambivalence about whether the *News24* comments section could be construed as an ideal public sphere, where rational debate could occur. The uncivil and emotional nature of many of the comments outweighed the few considered and constructive comments which could have advanced public debate, perhaps even deterring those who wanted to add valuable input to the conversation. However, as Mouffe (1999:758) argued, true democratic debate does not need to be rational and can include conflict, and thus online comments could be seen as an agonistic public sphere.

The interviewees and survey respondents agreed that the discourse found in *News24* comments was not debate, but “vitriol”, and did not serve any normative function. But interestingly, responses from the analysed comments indicated that many users considered the comments section to be a barometer of the state of South African society, and the conflict that arose was reflective of the sensitive state the country is in, and as a result, *News24* was criticised for closing off this mirror to society.

6.4.5 Is outsourcing comments to social media, especially Facebook, regarded as the best approach for *News24*?

One of the major trends informing the decision by publishers to close their comments sections is the shift towards social media, where audiences are increasingly absorbing news, and where conversations are progressively taking place. Moving comments to social media “has proven to be a logical choice” for many (Huang, 2016:11). The same can be said for *News24*, which currently has in the region of 4.5 million “likes” on Facebook and where many of its users were already interacting and commenting. The interviewees and respondents felt that there was a moderate increase in comments on *News24*’s Facebook page after comments were closed on *News24* itself, and that there were less uncivil comments. Having more engagement on *News24*’s Facebook page was seen as a positive thing, as there was a potential to reach a wider audience, even if that audience was not on the *News24* platform.

However, there was apprehension about handing over audiences to a third party which has its own commercial interests at heart, as well as the view that outsourcing comments to Facebook could be seen as an easy way out, absolving *News24* of the responsibility of what is published on its Facebook page, even though Facebook has its own terms and conditions. Facebook (2015:1) states it is “not responsible for any offensive, inappropriate, obscene, unlawful or otherwise objectionable content or information” that may be seen on its platform, and while it provides rules for user conduct (including requests not to post hate speech or intimidate other users), it absolves itself of the actions or content of any user of Facebook. This raises the question of who is ultimately responsible for the nature of comments that appear on an online news organisation’s Facebook page, and who should moderate these comments.

The fact that *News24* staff do not closely monitor the comments on its Facebook posts, largely due to capacity constraints and the lack of moderation tools on the Facebook platform, should be of concern, as potentially problematic comments may slip through and undermine the intentions of closing comments on *News24* itself in the first place, namely reputational concerns about being associated with negative comments, and legal concerns about being liable for them.

6.4.6 What is the ideal situation for hosting online comments, according to *News24* staff and management?

The majority of websites surveyed by the WEF agreed that comments could be beneficial and were trying to find ways to get them to work, including increased moderation, opening fewer articles for comments, opening comments for a shorter time, and restricting who can comment (Huang, 2016:15). This largely echoes what emerged from this research: *News24* management and staff agreed that better moderation, more control, and better technology would be the ideal situation for hosting comments. The underlying principle is that user interaction is the lifeblood of an online publication, and *News24* needs to foster this in some way – if not through comments open by default on all articles, then opening comments on select articles and opinion pieces and encouraging debate and interaction. The fact is that in order for comments to work optimally, *News24* management would need to allocate resources for more moderators or technological solutions (unless the Coral Project's proposed free software is deemed suitable), making it primarily a commercial rather than normative decision.

6.5 Examining the problem statement: How did the decision by *News24* to close down its comments facility impact this particular media outlet, as well as perceptions about the state of journalism and public discourse in South Africa?

In conclusion, it would appear that, given the international trend of closing comments and increasing concerns of legal liability for comments, as well as concerns about *News24*'s reputation, the decision by *News24* to close comments was not a matter of if, but when.

The debate about comments centres on one of the fundamental features of online journalism, that of audience participation and engagement. Users visit a website because they want to interact, as the uses and gratifications theory shows, and closing comments undermines

this essential attribute, while impinging on the idea that the Internet can serve as a public sphere. At the same time, outsourcing comments to a third party can negatively affect a website. But this is what many, including *News24*, have done, sacrificing engagement in order to take a political economy approach by minimising risk and freeing up resources to focus on their the wellbeing of the business and also its core journalistic functions.

The challenge for online news organisations appears to be whether to manage comments better or close them and outsource them. It seems there is general indecision about how to approach comments, resulting in unwillingness by many to commit to a firm direction. Most publications, including *News24* appear to have adopted a fence sitting approach – they’ve closed default commenting facilities on their pages and directed users to Facebook, but haven’t closed comments entirely, keeping them open on select opinion or news articles in acknowledgement of their importance and value; and at the same time and leaving the door open to bringing them back in some form. This could be in anticipation of improved moderation technology, such as what the Coral Project is working on; a turnaround in fortunes which would allow a significant investment in more staff for moderation purposes; or just waiting to see what others are doing and seeing if these best practices could be applied to their situation.

This indecision is reflected in the findings of the World Editors Forum report on comments, as Huang (2016:19) explains:

There is no single best way to manage comments. Each news organisation faces a distinct audience and culture, different business challenges, and varying legal and societal constraints and expectations. Yet as the online world fills with trolls, news organisations do have a role and an opportunity to create a space that is conducive to civil conversations and will contribute towards business sustainability.

It can be argued that *News24* faced a distinct audience and culture, given South Africa’s divisive history, which resulted in particularly heated and racially charged comments. There was also perhaps increased sensitivity to hosting hard-hitting, antagonising or just plain offensive

arguments on its comments forum, and gate-keeping through moderation had become increasingly difficult. In this light, closing automatic comments could be seen to be the best decision for the brand, and also for race relations and nation building, helping create the normative space for civil conversations that are pre-moderated, instead of the free-for-all that characterised the comments before they were closed. The resultant drop in engagement could be considered a necessary sacrifice for the sake of the brand and a better national discourse.

The research has demonstrated that for now, the status quo at *News24* could be considered the most practical and effective compromise – closing comments on all articles but opening them selectively. The way *News24*'s decision to close comments was implemented, though, appears to have been an “out of sight, out of mind” approach, meaning that the promises of opening comments on select articles deemed conducive to constructive debate, other than just opinion pieces, has largely been forgotten.

The interviews, survey and content analysis have shown that the decision by *News24* to close down its comments section has thus had a negligible impact on both the product and the state of journalism and public discourse. *News24* may have suffered by losing a small number of users and from decreased engagement, but the challenges and risks associated with comments outweighed this. Journalism may be poorer for not having immediate commenting options which can add value and new information to a story, but there are other social media channels where this interaction can still take place. And normative public debate is increasingly taking place on social media, so the loss of comments on every story on *News24*, many of which were marred by abusive trolling, cannot arguably have had a negative effect on such discourse.

6.5 Limitations and areas for future research

This case study was limited in that it focused specifically on *News24* and the reasons for its decision to close comments, and did not compare this to other publications to see to what extent they shared the same challenges and decision making processes. This comparative study could be undertaken to give a more comprehensive analysis of the South African online news environment. Other limitations included possible researcher bias due to my position in the *News24* editorial staff, although the social-scientific design of the study works against the danger

of personal bias, and the small sample of management and staff involved in these decisions who were surveyed for this research. The content analysis of comments was not a representative sample of the broader *News24* user population, but of those that commented, and this was the most accessible way to gauge reaction to the decision to close comments. Ascertaining the views of a broader sample of users would require much broader research, especially of users who do not use the comments facility.

Recommendations for future research would be a comparative study of other sites which have had similar challenges, as well as exploring the outsourcing of comments to Facebook, analysing these comments and the way users interact on that platform compared to a news website. A more detailed analysis of trolls, and the motivations behind this anti-social behaviour which manifests in commenting forums, could explain why such forums became so problematic that they were shut down. And given the sensitive political and racial situation in South Africa, a more comprehensive examination of online comments could be undertaken, analysing them from the perspective of an ideal public sphere or agonistic one, where rational debate is not obligatory.

Recommendations for *News24* would be to focus more on selectively opening comments on more articles, not just opinion pieces. The tools are in place to open comments, and international best practice could be followed, allowing comments for a limited period of time only, and selecting key topics or themes to facilitate debate. Comments posted on *News24*'s Facebook page and other social media sites should be more closely monitored to avoid potentially problematic comments which could negatively affect the brand. And more thought could also be given to finding ways to encourage user feedback, not just through comments facilities but creative ways to solicit UGC, in order to make up for the loss of user engagement as a result of the decision to close comments.

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Addendum 1: Interview questions

Management questions:

1. Are comments a good or a bad thing? / Do comments add value to a news website?
2. What are the biggest positives? What are the biggest negatives?
3. What was the thinking behind *News24* closing comments?
4. Was it influenced by international trends/legal concerns/reputation concerns?
5. What is the ideal situation? (ie full time moderators, better technology)
6. Do you think *News24* will suffer as a result of turning comments off?
7. Do you think *News24* Users will go elsewhere? Or comment on *MyNews24*?
8. Will *News24* turn comments back on?

Staff questionnaire:

1. Are comments a positive addition to an online news publication? Yes/No/Maybe
2. Explain the positives and negatives of online comments
3. Can you say that comments hold a mirror to society?
4. Did *News24* have an unfair reputation for its comments?
5. Do you agree with *News24*'s decision to close comments?
6. Do you miss *News24* comments?
7. What is the ideal situation, ie the best way to encourage healthy debate online, and control trolls etc at the same time? (ie full time moderators, better technology)
8. Do you think *News24* will suffer as a result of turning comments off?
9. Where do you think regular *News24* Users will comment? Facebook/other sites/*MyNews24*?
10. Do you think *News24* Users will still comment through *MyNews24*?
11. If so, do you think the quality and tone of comments will increase?
12. Do you think *News24* will turn comments back on at some stage?
13. Briefly explain the pitfalls of moderating comments (registration/login, bias etc)
14. Did you feel drained and depressed after moderating comments?
15. Examples of comments – would you approve/disable these?

Addendum 2:

Farewell to comments: Why we are making a change

2015-09-08 07:08



This column was written by former News24 editor Andrew Trench on September 11, 2015, explaining News24's decision to remove comments from all articles.

Andrew Trench

On Friday, September 11, 24.com will join international news leaders by implementing an important change in how we handle comments on our site.

We have decided to switch off comments on articles as a default from Friday and to implement a different approach to how we handle user contributions and engagement with our content on our platform.

Our decision to change our comments policy follows months of internal debate and discussion which has seen us consider all options practically available to us on how to wrangle the thousands of comments which are made on 24.com each day.

The end result of these debates is that we have decided that we wish to be known for the quality of our content rather than for our comments.

Our decision is part of the evolution of 24.com as South Africa's leading digital news source.

This year has seen a significant investment in original journalism on News24. We have recruited and deployed a team of journalists across South Africa to build the country's first truly digital-first newsroom.

We have launched a national news service, the News24Wire, as a part of this investment.

At the same time, editors across our network have been working hard at honing their editorial strategies to ensure that we provide the best experience possible for our substantial daily audience.

As we have worked on this, the comments issue has loomed large. Each day the tone and substance of many of our comments appear increasingly at odds with the mission of editorial excellence which we have set for ourselves.

Many commentators insist on pushing the boundaries of free speech available to us in South Africa.

Comments tediously drift towards hate speech at worst and, at best, are often laced with prejudice.

Interesting and considered contributions are drowned out by a cacophony of insults from a minority of users.

This is not the experience we wish users to have in our home.

The internet is awash with social media platforms which allow unfettered free speech and increasingly are the more comfortable home of online conversations.

So come Friday we will join those like Reuters, CNN, Popular Science and others in switching off article-level comments as our default position.

So, does this mean that there is no place for user contributions on 24.com? No, not at all.

In the *News24* environment we will invite considered user contributions to be submitted to our *MyNews24* platform. Contributions will be evaluated by our editors and published if we feel that they are interesting and valuable to our user community.

Other sites in our network like *Fin24*, *Sport24* and *Channel24*, and the others, will provide other means for user contributions using email submissions or other channels. Our Afrikaans sister site, *Netwerk24*, is currently considering its comments policy.

While comments will be turned off as a default we will retain the editorial discretion to open article-level comments on material where we believe comments will add value. A great example of this is when *News24* users mobilise to assist someone who is the subject of a story we have written or who thoughtfully engage with a provocative analysis or opinion piece. Comments in these cases will be subject to more intense scrutiny.

We hope this move, controversial as it will no doubt be, will improve the user experience on 24.com. We also hope those who are prepared to invest time and thought in their opinions will submit them through the channels we will provide and that these contributions will find a place alongside the quality content we will continue to publish.

- Andrew Trench was News24's Editor-in-Chief until February 2016. He is now digital editor for TMG.

Addendum 3: Sample of comments received on the above article

Ani MalFarm - September 8, 2015 at 07:16

Silencing the voices of ordinary people. One step even closer towards dictatorship.

Mario Zoli - September 8, 2015 at 07:18

Think the ANC is involved now as well

Spikkels NK - September 8, 2015 at 07:23

Perhaps if the ordinary people engaged in civilized, intelligent discussion instead of trolling, slurs and insults this wouldn't have been necessary.

Seth Anderson - September 8, 2015 at 07:42

"Many commentators insist on pushing the boundaries of free speech available to us in South Africa."

By definition free speech has no boundaries, this is nothing more than censorship, I for one will no longer read *News24* at all.

C'est moi - September 8, 2015 at 07:46

Removing the only interesting thing they could offer.

Pat Riot - September 8, 2015 at 07:47

A huge mistake by *News24* ! Obviously opinions will have some degree of bias. If by allowing people to comment, you got people to visit your news site, I say so be it ! Well, it seems like all good things must come to an end. So, here we part ways. You can agree to disagree but do it before 9/11 !

Patrick Winter533 - September 8, 2015 at 07:48

The way many of the articles are written and the headlines used are often triggers to the comments made. I think News 24's hit rate and advertising revenue may decline rapidly as a result of this brave move.

Priscilla Maguma Chibvamushure - September 8, 2015 at 07:54

Only came here to read comments,

Kwazi Mchunu - September 8, 2015 at 07:59

I fully stand by *News24* with their decision by turning off their comments. The was fast becoming a site where people were easily throwing shade & hate to a certain group of people. Thank you *News24* - Great News!

Natasha Laurensen - September 8, 2015 at 08:06

I agree to all of this. What a disappointment. Cheerio *News24*, it was good to be able to voice ones opinion while we could.

You'll have to up your game and how your articles are written to keep people remotely interested.

Maichael Antonny - September 8, 2015 at 08:07

News24 has made the right decision ... PULL THE PLUG ON THESE MOSTLY RACISTS COMMENTS !!

SA will be a better place for this !!

SimonC1969 - September 8, 2015 at 08:13

Amen!

Ardi Coetzee - September 8, 2015 at 08:19

Wow. Censorship. bye bye *News24*.

JaCo Venter - September 8, 2015 at 08:29

It is a Globalization Effort to stop the truth from coming out. Journalism is in favor of who owns the News Agencies. They put the news in words that favors them and The Comment section was a way for people to collectively unravel the truth between them. This is not allowing Free Speech. This is taking Free Speech away from the Truth Seekers !!

Victor van Heerden - September 8, 2015 at 08:31

More truth is found in the comments than in the articles. The articles on *News24* are mostly copy paste and very weak indeed and politically correct which means totally insipid. I visit this site to read the comments. Much better and more varied news is available today. Why read local focal rubbish when i can read newspapers in London, New York and Sydney.

News 24 has signed their death warrant.

Jaapie Bopape - September 8, 2015 at 08:37

I stopped perusing the IOL site to peruse *News24*, because I had the opportunity to comment, vent and laugh with other readers at some of the comments. I can't imagine *News24* being any other way. So done and dusted it was good while it lasted. Good bye.

Russel Sefako - September 8, 2015 at 09:04

I salute the editorship for this excellent decision as *News24* was reputed to be home to the most vitriolic, putrid and racist attacks here in SA. Some posts were used as a platform to vent out hatred for black people and were disguised as some form of free speech. I look forward to just reading articles and not the hateful comments that usually followed. To the offenders: Try and spew your bile on other social media avenues like Twitter and Facebook where they'll be glad to shut down your account.

Peter Michael Staffen - September 8, 2015 at 09:12

in any case they remove comments when they feel like it in any case , there is no freedom of speech anymore , the government has spoken

Chrono Man - September 8, 2015 at 09:13

Mr Editor, I agree that there has been far too much hate speech on *News24*. You could have dealt with those kinds of responses by simply deleting them. What we need is for South Africans to express their feelings at a time in our history when we need to vent. There is so much crime, injustices and unethical conduct and now we cannot respond. You are doing this for the sake of the "quality of your content". That aspect is a daily concern of us your readers. You have in your employ a substantial number of journalists who simply cannot write an article that is balanced, informative or newsworthy. The language is often poor and contains errors of various types, the construction of the article is poor and the core of the matter is often never even touched upon. Will these journalists henceforth also be shut up?

Brazo Motswako - September 8, 2015 at 09:31

A huge part of reading articles on *News24* was reading the views of the commentators. Yes, there was a minority that would troll with hate speech and prejudice, but most of us tried to engage with the article and other commentators whether by commenting or thumbs up/down. That is what *News24* had going for it.

My feeling is the traffic to this site will drop without the commentary section.

Faith Keabetswe Leburu - September 8, 2015 at 10:01

Nope, it's not dictatorship. Humans can be very disgusting indeed, it's just a pity everyone else has to suffer but the trolling and slurs going on these platforms are a serious eye sore.

Ani MalFarm - September 8, 2015 at 10:02

All those thinking that boycott, drop in readership or in profit would matter to *News24* are very mistaken. The bigger goal is completely different here, and even if the newspaper (or the whole country for that matter) were to go completely bankrupt - such decisions would have still be taken and enforced. And all those blaming racism or using it as a convenient excuse to achieve or destroy anything - racism stopped being the main issue in this country the day the ruling party installed jamming device in Parliament, and assaulted and threw the EFF black opposition MP's out like dogs.

Jon van der Heever - September 8, 2015 at 10:10

We may as well go back to buying and reading newspapers, because comments cannot be made on those either.

Why not just ban trolls and people who clearly lack some savvy?

What's the point in having a news platform if you approach feedback this way?

Willem Van Tonder - September 8, 2015 at 10:23

It is a very good idea. This comments are too full of hate and lies. People read nonsense on here and if it supports their skewed views it is accepted as fact.

It has got to go as it causes divisions and hate

Roelof Matthysen - September 8, 2015 at 10:27

This is a sad but necessary decision. I have been using *News24.com* since the early 2000s. Then it was a useful tool with invaluable comments which contributed to nation building. But I watched the forum deteriorate into a home for racist and prejudicial comments. At some stage I decided to leave it and I did for a couple of years. Came back recently, only to find that it has reached bottom low. 24.com tried to introduce a logon system but people use fake name and continue to spew vitriol

Stand4Truth - September 8, 2015 at 10:33

I will switch to M&G. Cheers

Daniel Mpande614 - September 8, 2015 at 10:54

I am not surprised at all. Some of the hate speech was just too much. It was becoming a forum for trolls. What they should have done was blacklist the offenders.

AliciaLouise - September 8, 2015 at 10:59

This is the reason I read this *News24*, and especially to read what fellow South African's have to say. The crazy/stupid ones as well as the well informed. I have seen people's vision of our country change over the years. Ultimately this was a good way of communicating with one another. Many of the people who comment, all colours and creeds are now Facebook friends, and I have met with a few and had in depth discussions, which opened my eyes to so much. Seeing the world through other's eyes, has taught me much. So from me.....a Sad Goodbye. I shall read the Argus once more.

Kallie Marie - September 8, 2015 at 11:35

ANC's propaganda tool and they don't want us to have a voice !! They have been doing this anyway on serious matters

Cilliers Neethling - September 8, 2015 at 13:17

Why is a comments platform on N24 your voice? You seriously can't say that if comments are disabled you will be silenced? The article states that they will still publish comments, so next time we write a comment it must be something of value, something you thought about. It is way too easy for most people to type a half baked comment and strike enter. And there, the nonsense most spew is there for everyone to see.

You cannot seriously say that the comments have been mostly constructive, because it most definitely have not. I think it is a great idea. And before you post something about the editors being pro-ANC or anti the ordinary person, just think about it for a second. N24 are always publishing criticizing reports etc. and there are no reason for one to become paranoid about the editors evaluating your comment before publishing it online.

Pat Riot - September 8, 2015 at 14:01

Where are *News24* offices ?!!! I say we blockade the streets with our computers, laptops and tablets !!! You shall not silence us, not matter how idiotic some comments are.... :)

Nhamo Dzenvika - September 8, 2015 at 15:47

This is a very good decision. The comments here were polarising society. They were not based on reason but emotions and for that, take a bow *News24*

Myrti Viridis - September 8, 2015 at 08:29

"Contributions will be evaluated by our editors and published if we feel that they are interesting and valuable to our user community." The exact definition of censorship! The "nanny" press imitating the "nanny" state. I suggest *News24* rename themselves to "Nanny24" and make their motto "Baby, we feed you good news."

Leon Quintin Broodryk - September 8, 2015 at 07:16

The comments are most of the time more fun to read than the article??

DerpyHooves - September 8, 2015 at 07:50

News24 was the best platform to troll idiots! What will I do with all my free time now?

AG Plan B - September 8, 2015 at 08:11

Read News 24 and comment on TWITTER!! Viva TWITTER!! I will no longer read News 24 as I came here for the best part - the comments!!! This is a political move.

Marty Stu - September 8, 2015 at 10:43

I agree 100%. This is the only reason I regularly visit *News24*. Without being able to have your say, I think they'll lose a lot of readers. I have suggested they start a discussion forum with links from each article- kind of like Mybroadband does. That way they can keep the comments and news separate. If not, then I think the market will shift and people will go somewhere else to have their say.

Deeked De Dose - September 8, 2015 at 08:06

Don't be silly, *News24* is not really interested in what people want to say... or how they feel...or even what attracts them to the site

Fact is..... - September 8, 2015 at 09:31

GUPTA ANC COMMUNIST censorship

Janre Van Jaarsveld - September 8, 2015 at 07:21
Dictatorship, here we come!

Marumo Gaddafi Waka Maake - September 8, 2015 at 07:22

Good move, comments on this site were always racist and biased. Most ppl used this site to insult the president and the ruling party even on the stories that had nothing to do with them,

Elsabe Joubert - September 8, 2015 at 07:22

I fully agree with this move by *News24*. I'm always saddened to read the negative, hateful comments given by readers. The comments do nothing for nation-building and provide no substance. (I will miss the comments however when the Cheetahs beat the Bulls at Loftus!).

Beatrix Rode - September 8, 2015 at 09:25

And what is going to improve nation building now? The one-sided articles from *News24*?

Yakobi Funaihu - September 8, 2015 at 07:24

This is a great decision. I have often referred people to *News24* comments to see that racism and prejudice is alive and well in South Africa. I realise that many of the comments come from a minority of people who cannot claim that they represent the majority of South Africans but am very relieved that I will no longer have to read hateful comments after every news article. I applaud *News24*

Ya right - September 8, 2015 at 07:24

What a load of crap. News is for the people by the people and not made up propaganda that you idiots write. You love to stir crap in the land and then don't want the backlash.

David Johnson653 - September 8, 2015 at 07:24

Yip. It sounds like government started to threaten *News24.com*. Disgusted that SA is very fast following the exact path Zimbabwe did. Give it another couple years at most, and SA will have many laws and other things happening leading to its final Zimbabwe style demise.

Fred Tucek - September 8, 2015 at 07:25

Cop-Out!! There goes the freedom of speech you guys are so hardcore about. The sad thing is that the comments on *News24* accurately portray the current social and political attitudes in South Africa. This policy will do nothing to White-wash the current mood.

Jacques Taylor - September 8, 2015 at 07:26

I need my daily injection of humour.....

Dave Parker - September 8, 2015 at 07:26

What am I going to do with all the free time? It has been a joy engaging people of different persuasions and the fun banter about everything

Hannes Engelbrecht - September 8, 2015 at 07:27

I think it's about time. The comment section has become a breeding place for haters. A valuable tool for open debate but unfortunately abused by many.

Colin-Debs Lucke - September 8, 2015 at 07:27

The comments generally were far more interesting than the news articles.....cheers News 24, will be removing you from my apps

Jimmy Baloyi - September 8, 2015 at 07:28

I fully support this stance and I agree that most of the comments border on hate speech and racist attacks amongst fellow South Africans. At times the platform is being abused to attack this or that political party or racial group and I believe that's not the future I would envisage for my children.

Eddie Botha - September 8, 2015 at 07:28

Even as a journalist who supports freedom of speech, I totally agree with your new policy. Unfortunately we live in an abnormal society and many, if not the majority, readers who commented on articles etc, have misused the opportunity to comment on issues in a decent way. I have always been very concerned about the open racism and hatred which were evident in some comments. Good decision.